Alienation

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Raphael is losing himself in growing doubts about his place in the world, and it's only made worse when he attracts the notice of a new criminal element in the city. His brothers come together to help him before it's too late. COMPLETED!

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Chapter 1

Donatello was the first one to notice that something was wrong.

He was in the dojo, on his own, running through a few exercises: apparently his mind hadn't been there enough during practice. So said Leonardo, though Don thought he was just grouchy because he and Raphael had fought.

Again.

Still, it was best not to argue, and Don didn't mind a chance to get some private time in, running through katas that were so ingrained he hardly had to think about what he was doing.

Michelangelo was watching TV in his room, of course. Leo was with Splinter, probably complaining about Raph again.

Raph was out. He'd gone before practice and not come back, which meant he was patrolling.

Don finished a kata and paused, rolling his shoulders to relax the beginnings of tension before altering his balance and going into another more complicated one.

Patrolling meant Raph was topside. Don didn't actually know what he did up there - he knew a lot of times Raph and Casey were together, and a lot of times they came back with bruises.

Don and Mike figured Raph called it 'patrolling' because it sounded better than 'picking fights with stupid street punks'. Raph claimed he got just as much practice topside as he did in their sessions in the dojo, so he used his outside excursions as an escuse not to have to run through routines in the dojo.

So when Raph walked in, just as Don was finishing up a kata, Don knew in an instant that something was wrong.

Raph saw him there. He grunted some sort of greeting, and padded to the other side of the mats.

Don stayed quiet - Raph preferred it, and Don wasn't the best with words most of the time. Still, something was wrong.

Raph had already chucked his street clothes, and his arm was bleeding. He was tense and narrow-eyed under his mask, stretching out muscles that were obviously already sore.

Punishment, maybe? Maybe Leo or Splinter sent him in to…

No. Don hadn't heard their voices, and God knew punishing Raph always involved some sort of shouting. Don hadn't heard anyone even talking, which meant Raph came in unnoticed.

Don slipped into another kata, one of the easy ones he wouldn't have to think about. And he watched his brother.

Raph cut his stretching short, and without a glance in Don's direction he faced the wall and crouched in his normal battle stance.

Don watched, curious.

Raph drew his sai, hesitated, and then suddenly tossed one over his shoulder. It fell with a dull clang onto the mat behind him.

Don cocked his head as his hands slid from position to position.

Raph hesitated, then moved in a burst of action, twisting and throwing himself backwards onto the mat. He landed on his knees and dove for the sai, and came up on his knees ready to fight.

Then he let out a loud breath and got to his feet. He crouched in his stance again instantly, and again tossed the sai behind him.

Don cocked his head, watching the repeat. This time when Raph threw himself back he landed closer to the weapon, and he grasped it and was up in seconds.

Then he straightened, obviously unsatisfied.

Don figured it out as he watched the next repeat of the move.

Raph was looking for the best way to retrieve a weapon. Trying to figure out how to move so that he was open to attack as brief a time as possible.

It wasn't a bad idea. Actually, it was pretty damned smart. Don didn't have to worry about that kind of thing often - his weapon took a two handed grip, and the bo was long and sturdy enough that if it did get knocked from both hands, he was usually within grasping range of an end no matter where it landed.

But the sai were small, comparatively light.

Don stopped pretending to exercise and stood still, watching his brother the fourth time around.

When Raph landed he overshot the sai and had to roll to grab it.

"Shit. Shit, shit, shit." He got to his feet, glowering.

Don cleared his throat. "Listen."

Raph's eyes snapped to him.

Don held up his hands in peace. "Even on the mats, they make a sound when they hit the ground. Listen to where it lands instead of trying to see the arc it flies in."

Raph frowned and looked away from him to some invisible enemy. He let the sai fly back, and paused. The light thump of the metal on the padded mat was clear enough in the silent room, and when Raph flew backwards he landed in the perfect place to scoop the sai and roll to his feet in barely a second's time.

This time when he straightened he nodded to himself, rolling his shoulders a little. Relaxing.

Don hesitated. "See Casey tonight?"

Raph's grip shifted on his sai. "Mm. He says hi."

Don smiled faintly, doubting either Raph or Casey had given any thought to the three of them or Splinter. "Your arm bad?"

Raph straightened. He glanced at his arm as if surprised it belonged to him. He flexed it, rolled his wrist. "Nah."

Don went to the side of the mat. The other side of the room held the weapons and training pads. This side had bandages, water. Masks and guards. All vital to practice.

He took up a roll of gauze. "Come here."

"Donnie, I'm actually kind of doing something here."

"You bleed on the mats you clean the mats."

Raph cursed under his breath, but stalked across the mat to Don, sheathing the sai.

Don offered a faint smile.

Raph stuck out his arm, glowering.

"Did you clean it?" Don didn't bother waiting for an answer - there was still sweat and dirt from topside all up Raph's arm. Definitely not disinfected. He reached back and found the bottle.

Raph sighed, loud and deliberate.

Leo would have shoved the bandages into Raph's arms, stormed off, told him he hoped he got an infection and lost the damn arm if he wanted to act like that.

Don just knew Raph's annoyance for what it was - someone had gotten the better of him topside, and he was worried.

"Someone knock the sai out of your hand?" he guessed, mild and curious. Had to be careful to use the right tone with Raph.

Raph shrugged. "Made me toss 'em. Had Casey at gunpoint."

Don looked up. "What? Gunpoint? Who were you after?"

"Just some punks. Nobody."

"Nobodies with guns."

"Idiots. We got 'em. Just, before I could get the sai back…" He held up his arm. His hand was shaking, but he didn't seem to notice. "No big deal."

Don grabbed his arm, studying the gash closer. Not dirt around it. Gunpowder.

He let out a breath, startled. "You were shot."

"Not really. Grazed, Casey called it. Flesh wound." Raph grinned fiercely.

Don gaped at him.

"Don't tell anybody, huh? Splinter'd jump on my ass, and Mikey'd just worry."

Don frowned, but got to work blotting disinfectant on cotton batting.

Raph hissed when the alcohol touched his wound.

Don got it as clean as he could manage, and wrapped the wound tightly. Raph was right, it wasn't bleeding out. Flesh wound. But the idea of it…

Even after Shredder, after the Foot, after the things they'd faced, guns still seemed like a horror. Worse than the rest, because any clumsy amateur could have one, and could kill with it.

"You ever think…"

Don looked up. The voice was Raph, but the tone was quiet and strange.

Raph drew his eyes from the wall to Don. "Ever wonder what we do this for?"

Don shook his head.

Raph smiled faintly and looked away again. "Guy that shot at Casey and me, he and his pals just got done hitting up this couple at gunpoint. Robbed the guy, scared this little nothing slip of a girl half to death. Probably gave her nightmares for life. These guys were scum. Lowest of the low, you know?"

Don nodded, silent.

Raph scratched at his neck with his free hand. "This guy, this scum, after he does this," he gestured at his wound, "he gets a look at my face, right? I kinda got knocked off balance, hat went flying. You know."

Don nodded again. He knew.

"Takes one look at me and starts shouting. Like I'm the one jumping him out of nowhere. Starts telling his boys to call the cops on me. He wanted to call them about me."

Don fastened the bandage in place, deft with years of experience tending to himself and his brothers. Any one of them could bandage any wound blindfolded.

His gaze lifted to Raph's face, and he got the idea right then and there that whatever was wrong with Raph was serious.

It was always hard to tell where Raph was concerned. He was so moody all the time that a real smile out of him seemed like a hard-

won miracle. But despite the temper and the grouchiness, whenever something really hit Raph deep he got quiet. Soft.

He could bitch for hours about Mike eating the last of a box of cereal, but when it mattered, he kept it all inside.

Don asked even though he knew he wouldn't get a real answer. "What's going on, Raph?"

"Nothing. Wild night, that's all. Makes me wonder what I'm doing, you know?"

Don nodded, though he knew if Raph was willing to talk about it than it wasn't the worst of his problems.

"We spend our whole lives protecting these people, and I don't know why. We don't belong to them. They're not our responsibility. We're like…stray dogs who just picked some family at random and fight to protect them, even though they don't so much as through out scraps of food."

Don thought about that. "In a way, I guess we are. But mostly we fight because we're trained. We're ninja, and that's what we do."

Raph snorted, looking away. "We didn't exactly get a choice, though, did we?"

Don's spine straightened. He regarded his brother's profile.

Raph looked back after a minute. "You ever realize you've spent the last few years just biding your time? I feel like…I'm going on automatic, just letting the days pass by until my real life can actually start. But times like this I realize…this is it. Nothing else is coming. This is all we're ever gonna be."

Don wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't good with words. He was good with things, with his hands, with machines and tools and research. He could quote a dozen philosophers if he wanted to. Tell

Raph what Thomas Hobbes believed, about determinism and fate and things like that.

But Raph had the wrong kind of personality to be quoting at. Leo could've expressed it in practical terms. Mikey could've said something optimistic about some possible future where they had the world at their feet.

Instead Don just patted Raph's arm lightly over the bandage. "You're all done."

Raph let out a breath. "I wish." But he looked over and realized Don meant his arm. He shook it out, pulling away from Don. He drew a sai, testing out a few moves, and nodded his satisfaction when the bandage didn't bunch of shift.

"You're a good guy, Donnie."

Don watched him get right back into training. Sai flew back, he flew after it.

After a minute he left the dojo, quietly moving through the pipes from the living space into his own private room.

Something was wrong, and he wondered if it was worth mentioning to the others. Probably not, since he wasn't sure what it was.

Still, of all of them Raph was the one who never had trouble fighting. He jumped into battle with more enthusiasm than the rest of them combined. He was…violent, for lack of a less crude term.

To hear him start doubting it, to wish he was done having to fight…it was foreign. Wrong.

Add to that the realization that Raph wouldn't ever talk so willingly about the worst of his problems, and that meant there was even worse things on his mind.

Don told himself he would talk to Casey - figure out just what happened and see if he couldn't trace Raph's behavior back to it. And although he knew the odds of running into Casey without Raph around were slim to none, he felt better just having the plan.

Chapter 2

Author's Note: I'm moving up the turtles' timeline a bit, so the story can be set present day.

And thanks to all of you! I'm astounded I've gotten so much feedback after just one day!

Michelangelo wasn't the smartest guy in the sewers, maybe. He was pretty obtuse, preferring to stay in his little bubble where things were happy and everything was fine.

But even he noticed when things got this weird.

"Do you realize no one's said a word like all day?"

Donnie looked up from the computer he screen he'd probably been staring at for hours. He shrugged. "Better than everyone fighting, isn't it?"

"I guess so." Mike came in without waiting for an invitation and dropped on Donnie's bed with a sigh. "It's weird. How we can't just hang out together these days. I mean, I can hang out with you, and with Leo, and with Raph. But all of us together…"

"I know."

There wasn't much use in them talking about it. The problem wasn't with either of the turtles in that room.

Which made Mike wonder why he wasn't chatting about it with Raph instead. It wasn't like he was scared to go talk to him - he and Raph were close. Always had been. Something had always kind of clicked with them that made them pals on top of being brothers.

But Raph had been prickly lately, and Mike went to Don because he knew full well Don saw a lot of things he didn't.

"So what is it?"

"The usual." Don just shrugged, pushing back from the computer and facing Mike. "Raph being gone so much, and Leo pushing him so hard about it."

Mike sighed, loud and gusty. Sometimes he got more than a little annoyed at how dramatic his brothers all seemed to be. There were so many harsh things in the world already - why add to it with fighting and holding grudges and being rude?

Don spoke in the silence that followed. "You notice…they can't talk anymore without fighting?"

Mike hummed agreement. He tended to block the details out, but he wasn't so obtuse he didn't see the fights.

"Ever look at them?"

Mike dropped flat on his shell on the bed, lacing his hands behind his head. "Look at Raph and Leo?"

"Yeah. When they fight."

Mike laughed. "Why would I want to watch that?"

Don shrugged.

Mike looked over. "I know you said it for a reason."

"It's just…" Don glanced towards his doorway, then turned back to Mike. "They stand different. Any time they talk to each other, it's like they're getting into position for a fight. A real fight. Like they see each other as enemies."

Mike blinked, thinking back. He hadn't noticed, but if Don had then it had to be true.

He sat up, his smile gone. "That's messed up."

"Yeah."

Mike frowned, considering. He stood up.

Don squawked when Mike grabbed his arm, but he let Mike drag him out of the room without complaint.

"Alright! Everyone out here!" Mike's voice projected, loud and probably as stern as he was capable of being.

Leo's head poked out from the dojo. "Mike? What's going--"

"Out here. Now."

Don shrugged at Leo's look, and after a moment Leo came out, looking around.

Splinter stood in his doorway, watching.

Mike went to Raph's door and banged. "I know you hear me in there, psycho. Get your green butt out here."

He marched off, still towing Don behind him.

The door opened behind them.

Astonishing no one, Raph sounded annoyed. "What the hell, Mikey?"

Mike stopped in the middle of the room, throwing his arm around Don before he could escape the spotlight. "We are having a meeting."

"A what?"

"A meeting." Mike stood straight, facing down Raph. "In here. And you'll sit through it and you'll love it."

Raph snorted, but moved from his doorway into the living room.

Mike faced them, Raph and then Leo, and then he glanced Don's way. "What year is it?"

"Oh my God, he's insane."

They ignored Raph, but no one bothered answering.

Mike turned right to Don, knowing of all of them he'd speak up. "Well?"

"2007."

"Wrong."

Don blinked.

Mike faced them all, firm. "It's 2003."

"Someone hit him on the head last night?" Raph asked.

"Can it, red." Mike flashed a grin, but spoke just as firmly as ever. "It's 2003. Shredder's still out there. The Foot's everywhere, and when we go topside we get our asses into fights every single night. April's still on TV. Casey's….well. Still Casey. And us." He met his brothers' eyes one by one. "We're not bored, or jumpy, or yelling at each other constantly as if it ever does anyone any good at all. We're a team, and every single night we go up there and rely on each other to watch our backs."

Don slapped him on the arm suddenly and smiled, moving quietly to a chair to play audience.

Mike grinned. "Leo's gotta work out patrol for tonight, and Donnie's gotta study crime patterns to see where the Feet are hanging out.

Raph's getting Casey on the line, getting us psyched for a fight. And me?" He crossed the room. "I am ordering the pizza we're gonna slam down before we go." He grabbed the phone, and snapped his fingers. "Go!"

There was silence behind him. He put the phone to his ear and started to dial, but hung up after three numbers and whirled to face his brothers.

"I'm serious. You guys think we can keep going ignoring each other and fighting and going through these stale practices like we're learning anything new. And we can't. Raph's practically moving topside. Leo's driving himself nuts trying to keep us in shape. Donnie's bored off his ass and I'm starting to get downright grouchy under all the tension. So tonight, even if it only lasts tonight, we're going back four years. We're going to be the team we were then. Because if we don't and I end up in an actual real live bad mood, there's going to be hell to pay."

He turned back to the phone and dialed slowly. Hoping.

"Um. Okay." Leo's voice, drawn out and uncertain.

Mike could just picture the awkward looks they were all giving each other.

Don - bless his little heart - spoke up. "Right. Well. Lemme check some news sites and see if we can't chase down where the bad guys are keeping themselves these days."

"You've all lost your minds." Raph, of course irritated.

Damn it. Mike waited, knowing someone else would have to get him into it, because Raph was so close to Mike he never had to take him seriously.

Leo spoke up, his voice sharp. "And you've been getting slow lately. Maybe you should get in the dojo and warm up a little before you

start picking on other people's ideas."

Silence fell. Dangerous silence.

Mike shut his eyes, clutching the phone in his hand, refusing to look.

Raph spoke suddenly. "Well, maybe if you'd let us take on the guys where they live instead of grabbing them up two at a time on these dumb patrols…"

"Oh, now it's my plan that's the problem."

"It's you being a wuss that's the problem."

Mike beamed, turning back even as he placed their usual - usual years ago, when they still ate together all the time - order in over the phone. He caught Don's eyes as he talked.

Don grinned back.

Because Raphael and Leo were arguing, sure enough. But they were loose. The air wasn't thick with nervous tension and anger. Just the words of two brothers who never had been able to lay off each other, but did it because they cared.

"--telling you to get your chubby shell in there and do a few flips," Leo was barking when Mike tuned back in.

"Why don't you make me?" Raph fired back, almost…yes, actually grinning.

Leo crowed and pounced, leaping over the couch in a sudden twisting move that caught Raph by surprise. Leo bowled him over, pinning him. "Okay, why don't I?"

Raph growled.

"Hai!" Splinter's voice sounded out, sudden and sharp.

All eyes went to him, Leo frozen on top of Raph.

Splinter stretched out his hand, pointing at the dojo. "You break the furniture and you fix the furniture."

Leo grinned, turning to look down at Raph. "You couldn't take me in a fair fight anyway." He jumped up, heading for the dojo.

Raph was off the floor and after him in a blur of green and red. "Say that to my face, Leo! I dare you!" He was in the air, bowling into Leo from behind and rolling them both out of sight into the dojo.

Mike hung up the phone, wide-eyed and grinning. "Dude. I can't believe that worked!"

Don laughed. "You're the smart one. No denying it."

Mike was almost tempted to agree. Instead he glanced at Splinter.

Splinter just shook his head, mouth curled up at the ends, and moved silently back into his room.

Mike relaxed then. If his little trick had Splinter's approval, then everything was cool.

He went to the couch, bouncing down next to Donnie. "I can't be the smart one. I'm the pretty one. Everybody knows that."

Leo couldn't help a laugh as he was dropped onto his shell for the fourth time in five minutes. He rolled backwards, away from Raph's lunge, and used the wall to push himself up and flip out of Raph's range.

"Too slow, bro. I thought I was the old one."

Raph was showing all teeth as he answered. "You just act like it, you geriatric girl." He moved in, hands raised to strike.

Leo circled around the mat. "I'm an old woman and you still can't keep me down? What's that say about you?"

Raph laughed, an adrenaline-fueled bark.

Leo realized, sudden and sharp, that he hadn't heard that sparring laugh of Raph's in a long damned time.

The reflection distracted him just enough for Raph to make contact when he moved in. His chop caught Leo in the chest and sent him stumbling backwards.

"What's *that* say about me, Leo? Huh?"

Leo kept his arms up, defensive, as his feet carried him a little closer to his brother. "It says you hit like a three-year-old."

"This three-year-old's gonna knock grandma out." Raph moved in, feinting and darting another jab.

But Leo was ready. He dropped to a crouch and swept his leg, catching Raph off-balance and sending him to the mat, hard.

He was right there when Raph fell, pinning his hands to the mat. "What's that, Lassie? Timmy got his ass kicked by Miss Daisy?"

Raph laughed, breathy and surprised. "You been watching Mikey's TV too long." His body rocked, sudden and fierce, forcing them to the left and throwing Leo to the ground.

In a flash their positions were turned, and Leo was blinking up at his brother's bright-eyed grin.

Something about that hit him, hard enough that it almost hurt. His own grin faded and he looked at Raph, pained. He hadn't heard that laugh of his, hadn't seen him grinning and wound-up from a playful spar. Not in years.

Raph seemed to sense that Leo wasn't playing anymore. He didn't move, of course - they faked each other out all the time. But he tilted his head and returned Leo's look. "What?"

"Why don't we do this anymore?"

There was a pause.

Raph released him and rolled away, hitting his shell beside Leo on the mat.

They caught their breath, laying there silently looking up at the pipes stretching across the ceiling overhead.

Leo spoke slowly. "Mikey put us back four years ago. That can't be the last time things were fine. Can it?"

"Things were different then," Raph answered. Not prickly, though. Just quiet. Leo didn't get that instant flicker of tension that Raph's voice alone could cause lately.

"Why? Just Shredder, that was the only difference."

"Isn't that enough?"

Leo sat up, drawing his knees up. He absently massaged an ache on his leg. Raph'd kicked him during the sparring. He had a few spots that ached, and no doubt Raph did too.

Raph lifted up on his elbows, looking over at Leo. "We had Shredder. Shredder meant something to us. He was out for us. He killed Master Yoshi."

Leo nodded, tugging off his eye mask and wiping the sweat from his brow. "But even with him gone there's still crime to stop."

"They got ways of stopping it topside. They got cops crawling all over the city these days. What do they need us for?"

Leo frowned at that. "As many crimes as we stop every time we go up there, they obviously need us."

"Maybe." Raph hesitated, eyes skirting away.

Leo waited - Raph wasn't good with eye contact when he was speaking sincerely. That meant whatever was coming was real.

"Shredder was ours. The punks these days? They have nothing to do with us. We fight them when we see them. We scare the hell out of the people we're saving. We hide as much as we can. We don't get so much as a thank you, even though we're putting ourselves at risk as much as any cop. Why should we want to keep that up night after night?"

Leo crossed his legs under him. "Are you really asking?"

Raph nodded.

"But...you're the first one out there. You go almost every night, even when we don't. You've never had a problem risking yourself before now."

Raph scoffed. "Yeah, well. I got a lot of stuff in me that needs working out."

Leo frowned. "You know what Splinter says about relying on violence as an outlet for--"

"Yeah, yeah. I know what he says."

There was a pause. Leo wondered if they weren't about to lose this rare angerless hush.

Raph cleared his throat. "I used to think of this city as ours. We were its defenders, you know? We'd stick to the shadows at night, but we ruled those shadows. It was our turf, and God help anyone who fucked with that. Now?" He shook his head, bitterness thick in his voice. "Ask anybody, even someone we've helped personally, and

they'll say we got no place in this city. What, four radioactive amphibians? You nuts? We don't belong there, and they wouldn't want us if they knew about us. So what do we keep doing it for?"

Leo hesitated. He hadn't expected anything like this to come from Raph. Maybe Donnie. Hell, even himself sometimes. But not Raph.

"What else would we do?" he asked simply.

Raph looked back at him then. He let out a breath. "Hell if I know. We don't have a lot of options. Never did. Never really had any options at all, did we?"

Leo didn't answer that. The thought, voiced so plainly, struck something in him that set off an alarm. There was danger exploring that question, though where the danger came from he wasn't quite sure.

Maybe it came from knowing that in a way Raphael was right. They didn't have choices. They didn't ask to be in some cage, dropped down a sewer, covered in ooze and changed. They didn't ask to be raised by a rat who could only teach them what he himself knew - martial arts, the laws of ninja, the power of duty and discipline.

But saying so cast a shadow on Splinter, on how he had raised them. And Leo would have erupted if he thought that's where Raph's mind was. Splinter hadn't asked for this either, and considering what he'd had to deal with he had done an amazing job raising his four unexpected children.

But Leo didn't erupt, because from Raph's hedging he knew Raph didn't want to go there either. Raph didn't want to lay blame on Splinter, even if in his heart he felt it.

Leo stood up, stretching himself out experimentally. His body pulled and complained in more than a few places, but nothing seemed serious. He held out his hand to his brother.

Raph took it and let Leo tug him to his feet. "You gonna live?"

Leo rolled his eyes, his smile returning just slightly. "Looks like it."

"Lucky for you I pulled my punches."

"Oh shut up."

Raph grinned.

Leo returned it, and as they headed for the door he slipped an arm out, around Raph's shoulder. "You know…"

They slowed at the door. "What?"

"We don't just do it for lack of options."

Raph searched his face. "No?"

Leo met his gaze, steady and sincere. "We do it because not one of us could sit by and do nothing and know that innocents are being hurt somewhere near. Even if they don't know us or appreciate our help, we could never stand idle and watch them all fall."

There was something in Raph's eyes. Some kind of question, some forlorn hope.

Leo tugged him close with a smile. "Don't over-think it. That's Donnie's job."

Raph's mouth quirked up. "Yours too, you nagging old hag."

"He's already been beaten once, he thinks I won't do it again." Leo spoke loudly as they left the dojo behind. "Someone talk some sense into him."

"Beaten? In what dream world and by what stretch of the imagination do you think I did anything but kick your ass?"

Leo caught Donnie's eye, and saw a surprised happiness there. He smiled, feeling better than he had in weeks. Maybe months.

Maybe things could get better between them all. Maybe every day didn't have to be a battle.

"Where'd Mikey go?"

"Pizza." Don nodded towards the pipe that led to their regular delivery grate, even as footsteps and Mike's light voice rang out from beyond.

Leo, with his arm still comfortable over Raph's shoulder, greeted his youngest brother with a wave. "You know you're an idiot, Mike. 2004?"

Mike stepped down from the pipe, familiar box in hand. "You're just mad 'cause you're not the wise one anymore. Anyway, don't be rude - I brought a guest."

Leo's relaxation threatened to vanish when Mike was followed by a tall, muscled, wild-eyed man. "Casey."

Casey Jones looked around with an edged grin. "Hiya, boys." His mask hung from his hands, and Leo felt his shoulders tighten. The mask meant Casey was out on a hunt.

Sure enough, Casey's eyes caught on Raph. "Just the guy I was looking for."

"Yeah?"

"How'd you like to get a little payback for last night?"

Leo felt Raph tense instantly against him.

"Same guys?"

"In the same place, the cocky bastards."

Raph grinned, and it wasn't the gentle grin of a minute ago. "Hell, yes. Right now?"

"Right now, bro." Casey was already headed back out the pipe.

Raph was moving after him in an instant. "Save me some pie, Mikey."

Mike's smile was fading. "You guys have to do this…?"

They were long gone, through the pipes and splashing out of hearing.

Leo felt a sort of defeat making his shoulders slump. "Damn it."

"Yeah." Mike sighed.

Leo smiled at him, small and thin. "Good try, though."

"Try, nothing." Mike's smile returned as he moved to the table to set their dinner down. "I saw you two. That plan just full-on worked."

Leo conceded the point. "I think things might actually be alright."

"Maybe not."

They both looked at Don.

He was looking after Raph and Casey, but he turned grim eyes to Leo and Mike. "We should go after them. Whoever they're after is bad news."

"How do you…" But Leo figured it out. The neat bandage on Raph's arm that day was Don's work, and they must have talked. "How dangerous?"

"They carry guns."

The lid to the pizza box shut and dinner was forgotten.

Chapter 3

Raphael couldn't remember the last time he saw the sun shining.

They came out at night, when they came out at all, and he wondered as he moved if he'd ever actually seen the sun shining on the city.

He'd seen it at April's farmhouse, and on a few other excursions out of the city. But New York City and sunlight had never come hand in hand.

He made the jump to catch the ladder of a rooftop about five feet from the one he stood on. He moved up the ladder and tossed a grin back. "Coming?"

Casey was eyeing the jump, but he flexed his arms. Under his mask, Raph could tell he was grinning. "Out of my way, green."

Raph pushed away from the edge, looking around. They were close. Another block and they'd be at the place they fought the punks last night.

He looked up at the little bits of dark sky he could see between the taller towers of skyscrapers. Dark shadows against darker sky, broken only now and then by a light coming from a window.

He realized he didn't mind not seeing New York in the daylight. Night suited the city. Shadows and darkness fit better with the New York he knew. Somehow it seemed less unfair that he and his brothers couldn't ever really belong, if they had darkness and shadows to hide in. They could be part of it, even if they didn't belong to it.

He heard the grunt of Casey hitting the ladder behind him, and he shook his mind free of his oddly deep thoughts. He turned, wandered back to the side. "Gonna make it?"

Casey's masked face pointed up at him, and he started climbing. "Laugh it up, jerk. I'd've been there by now if it wasn't for you and these frigging roofs."

"You're the one who came down begging for help." Raph looked over Casey at the rooftops they'd already traveled.

Darkness suited the city he knew. During the day there would be people going to work, kids in schools, families on picnics. Civil lunches discussing business. Those things he had no part of.

He had no part in any of it. But he was closer to the nighttime.

"Wise ass." Casey heaved himself over the edge and looked around. "Figures they can't commit crimes in Central Park, or Times Square. We gotta haul our asses to alphabet city."

"You had other things to do tonight? If you weren't already down here you wouldn't have known they were back."

"I'm not allowed to bitch?"

Raph grinned. "If I said no you'd never be able to talk again."

"Screw you." Casey reached up, shoved his mask up off his face. "And what exactly was going on when I showed up, anyway? Real Hallmark moments down in the sewer."

Raph shrugged. He smiled a little, to think of the sparring match and Leo's words. What a relief it was not to have to fight Leo on top of fighting the world topside.

"I'm not gonna lose my partner in justice to your boring brothers, am I?"

"Watch it." Raph moved past him, over the tar of the roof to see where they had yet to go. "I'm still here, ain't I?" His eyes quickly found the path they'd take - no more jumps, which would keep Casey from griping. "Come on."

"Yeah, yeah." Casey's mask slid back down.

Raph made the two-foot jump onto the edge of the roof easily, but paused before dropping to the next building. He glanced at Casey.

Casey hauled himself onto the railing. "What?"

Raph smirked. "Your 'partner in justice'?" He laughed, jumping to the next roof and darting across.

"Fuck off, Raph."

They made the rest of the trip in silence, more alert as they got closer to their enemies.

There was a neat little flat-roofed two-story overlooking the parking lot where the punks had been the night before. Raph and Casey moved across that roof, silent and tuned in to any noises.

Voices were easy enough to hear, drifting up to them undisguised and unguarded.

These shits really were overconfident. Maybe they thought the scratch on Raph's arm had scared Raph and Casey off for good.

Maybe they were just stupid.

Raph peered over the edge, looking down.

Even less guys than there were last night. He counted six - maybe seven, if one was in the truck they were loading up. Same black clothes, same young faces. Could've been clean-cut college kids if they were out of the black and in Dockers and polo shirts.

Not the typical smelly thugs. But Raph wasn't picky about who he stopped from stealing. And these guys were dangerous.

He glanced over at Casey.

Casey returned the look, his gleaming eyes all Raph could see under the mask. "We got a plan here?"

Raph grinned. "Same plan we always have."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

They moved at once, jumping the one story down to the fire escape below.

The kids below heard the clatter of them landing on the iron escape, and all eyes swung to them.

Casey and Raph didn't hesitate, jumping to the ground, landing hard but ready for a fight.

And the fight came. About four of the guys, the ones with free hands, rushed in at once.

Every one of them came right for Raph.

Raph grinned, sai still in their sheaths, arms raised. He liked peace in the sewers, when it came to Leo and home.

But man, he still loved a brawl.

He disposed of one real quick, sweeping his leg out and knocking the idiot to the ground, where his head thunked hard enough that Raph could hear it.

A red-haired kid with a sour face jumped at him next. Raph, since he was a considerate friend, snapped hold of the kid's arm and pushed him Casey's way, to give the big guy something to do.

Voices rang out, calling from beyond the dim light of the parking lot.

Raph took care of a sloppy kid who didn't seem to even know how to make a decent fist, and his eyes scoured the grounds.

Shit.

There were more of them, coming from beyond the lot. Too many more, coming at once.

This was a set-up.

Raph glowered, taking care of his next attacker quickly. "Casey."

"I see 'em." Casey sounded winded, but a second later the familiar shape of his back was pushed against Raph's shell. Back to back - best way to fight when they were outnumbered.

Raph pulled out his sai. He could see the silhouette of Casey's hockey stick in the corner of his eye.

Raph looked out at the crowd, ready.

All of them were young, all of them were male. There were some on the edge of the growing group that weren't dressed in the black the others wore. Raph's eyes locked on them.

One, an older man than the others, seemed to meet his eyes dead on.

Casey moved at Raph's side suddenly, raising his stick.

As if it was a cue for action, at least ten of the black-clad kids around them and more in the back all drew weapons.

Guns.

Raph cursed to himself, low and vehement. He fucking hated guns. There was no way to fight against guns.

Fucking *cheaters* .

"You."

Raph looked up at the voice.

It was the older man from the back, moving through the group of boys. Maybe twenty-five of them had pressed in by then.

It was almost nostalgic, really. Raph hadn't faced a mob that big since the Foot had fallen apart.

"What exactly are you?"

He looked at the speaker again, his eyes narrowed. "What do I look like?" he answered stiffly, aware of Casey beside him, and the guns around him.

The approaching man stopped, still safely behind the first row of his guys. "A man-sized turtle. Or else a man dressed as a turtle."

Raph shrugged. "Take your pick." His eyes moved over the crowd, ready to take on the first one to break ranks.

The man pitched his voice louder. Formal. "My name is Prince, and I'd like to talk to you. You'll come back with us."

"I will?" Raph smirked.

"Are there more like you, I wonder?"

His smirk vanished instantly. "No. And fuck you. No one's going with you."

The man, Prince, nodded to one of the younger man in front of him. "Kill the man."

Raph moved instantly, sliding between Prince and Casey. His grips tightened on his sai, but he wasn't dumb enough to attack. He knew full well when he was screwed. This, the crowd and the guns and the man who wanted to 'talk', this was pretty much what screwed looked like.

He spoke fast. "Tell you what, ace. Let him walk, and I'll go with you."

"Shut up, Raph, I can take care of--"

"I don't see a problem with that. You. Get out of here fast if you want to get out at all." Prince spoke, calm and almost amused.

This guy wasn't in any doubt of his control. That was a bit worrying.

Raph backed up, butting his shell against Casey. "Get out of here."

"You think I'm gonna leave you with--"

"Unless you want to fight me right along with them, yes."

There was a resentful pause.

Raph glanced back, taking his eyes off Prince enough to meet Casey's gaze. "You know where to go."

Casey's eyes were narrowed. "Fine. You get your ass killed, it's on you."

Raph flashed a faint smirk. It was on him, sure, and he knew it better than anyone. He nodded back at Casey. No guilt, no blame. That's not how the two of them rolled.

Casey's shoulders tightened, but he nodded back. Under the mask he was probably furious.

He kept the hockey stick in his hand as he moved, leaving Raph's back unguarded and storming through the edge of the group. They let him pass, even moving out of his way.

He reached the edge of the parking lot and didn't look back. He stepped off the curb and was lost into the darkness.

Raph relaxed a little with him gone. He turned his eyes back to Prince.

Prince smiled, as casual as if they were meeting over a beer at a bar somewhere. "I've got all sorts of questions to ask you. Why don't we go on, leave my boys to their work?"

Raph smirked. If he was leaving guys there they'd have Casey and three more turtles on their ass real fast. Perfect.

"Fine." Prince wanted things to be civil? Raph could oblige. Hell, his arm still throbbed under the bandage, and he couldn't say he had any interest in getting shot again.

Prince and more than a few of his armed lackeys took Raph off into the darkness without a fight.

Leo's gaze moved restlessly over the rooftops. He could feel the tension in his brothers, on either side. But he couldn't rush.

There were too many options, and Raph and Casey could move too fast over these roofs. It wasn't as if there were footsteps to be followed, either.

"Donnie, what'd he tell you about where these guys were last night?" He asked without looking back, eyes on the roofs.

"Nothing. Just out." Don's voice was low.

Leo frowned. This was the last roof they had caught sight of two distant silhouettes on, so from here out it was up to him. He stopped looking for movement and instead searched for the most likely routes.

Despite the relative peace they'd had that night, he couldn't stop himself from grumbling. "Why are they going up against punks with guns? We've talked about that over and over again."

"It's Raph," Mike answered, moving to peer over the edge of the roof. "With Casey he's like Raph times ten."

"Too many of them carry guns these days anyway." Don stayed where he was, looking around as he waited for Leo to decide.

That was an ugly truth. Guns were repulsive weapons that had no honor in them, but they were getting to be as common as cell phones or wallets. It was one of the reasons why he and his brothers weren't topside more often, being protectors as they used to be.

The game had changed.

Leo spotted a jump onto a neighboring roof, and his instinct urged him on. "This way."

Don and Mike followed instantly, making the jump to the ladder of the next building quickly and quietly.

Leo was first up, and first to see the dark figure appearing on the other side of the roof.

"Guys," he hissed.

Don and Mike climbed up fast and fanned out behind him.

But the bright white hockey mask glinted, easy to see even in darkness.

"Casey?" Leo moved forward. "What's--"

"Man, am I glad your noses little asses followed us out here. Come on." Casey didn't hesitate, turning and moving back the way he'd come.

Leo glanced back, but the three of them followed without a word, grim and silent.

Chapter 4

Prince was an older guy than he looked from a distance. There were lines around his eyes, and his hair showed signs of growing grey under a dye job.

He didn't talk as his men ushered Raph into a jeep waiting beyond the glow of the parking lot lamps.

Raph didn't fight, but the jeep made him hesitate. If there had been any chance Casey would've been back in the next few minutes with help in tow, he would have stalled. But Casey had to make the trip to the lair and back, and that would be, what? An hour? Maybe Leo or Mikey could've stalled that long - they were good at talking. Not him.

Raph got into the jeep. He watched as the man who had claimed his sai from him moved into the front seat, and he frowned. He could've left one as a sign for his bros, but at least this way they were coming with him.

If he had thought about it sooner, he could have stripped off an elbow guard or his eye mask, dropped it for them. But they'd have Casey to show them where he was grabbed from. No use getting caught doing something rash.

He settled in and focused his thoughts on how to contact them once he got wherever this group was taking him.

He knew his bad guys, and this Prince, sitting right beside him in the back of the jeep, unafraid, wasn't about to sit him down for tea and a chat and then left him go.

This guy had all these kids, decent-looking kids, obeying his every command. Probably thought he'd be able to sweet-talk Raph too.

Guy had another frigging thing coming.

"I admit, I'm surprised at how easily you were convinced to join me," Prince said as the jeep pulled into the night.

Raph glowered out the window. "Yeah, me too."

"You care for your friend. That man you negotiated to spare."

Raph shrugged. "Maybe I've just got a basic appreciation for the value of life. Bet that's something you can't understand."

Prince chuckled.

Raph looked across at him. He could lunge, of course. Could have the guy's neck between his hands in a flash. Could order his boys to pull over.

But they had guns, and he was unarmed. He didn't like the odds, really.

When he got home he was seriously going to talk to Leo about some kind of training strategy focusing on guns. They were pretty much lost when one got pointed their way, and that was way too risky.

Prince studied him. "Do you truly value life? Are you able to think in terms of morals? Of conscience? What are you, I wonder?"

"Giant talking turtle, ace. What're you?"

Prince laughed again. "You say that as if it's commonplace."

"Yeah, well. I'm used to it." Raph looked at him hard. "And I'm capable of the same kind of deep thinking anyone else is."

"I see that." Prince's eyes scanned him, his face, his eyes, his skin and shell. "This is incredible."

Raph flitted his eyes Prince's way. "You never answered my question."

"What question is that?"

"What are you?"

Prince smiled. "I'm a teacher."

Raph blinked. "You're kidding."

"No. These men around us are my students."

"Oh, wait. You're one of those I-am-the-way-and-the-light guys who makes people drink kool-aid, aren't you?"

Prince laughed.

Frigging cheerful for a bad guy, Raph thought to himself.

"No, no, This isn't a cult. When I say teacher I mean just that. I'm a professor at NYU."

Raph stared at him.

Prince studied him right back. "So you have an understanding of moral behavior, an awareness of human history. A sense of humor, philosophical notions. Yet here you are. A giant talking turtle."

Raph grimaced, wanting to reach over and risk breaking the guy's neck. It was one thing to be a freak. One more thing to be a freak at the mercy of some guy claiming to be teaching a class.

But for the guy to keep harping on it, studying him like he was some exhibit at a zoo? He didn't need insult added to injury.

"When my boys told me what they saw last night I was dubious. Two vigilante crime-fighters in masks, I assumed. One mask was simply more realistic than the other. Yet they were right about you." He chuckled, seeming not to notice the growing heat from Raph's side of the car. "How many of my colleagues would envy me this discovery? How many scientists?"

Jesus.

Raph suddenly tensed, breath caught in his throat.

If this guy was serious, if he was some professor…would he be taking Raph to a school? To be dissected and studied and written about and thrust into the public eye?

That was the one thing he could *not* allow. Splinter never taught a lesson as fiercely as he taught the one about not being revealed to people.

He had to get out of there. Right that fucking second.

He glanced at Prince, but he was sitting back, shaking his head and chuckling at whatever thoughts he was having about displaying Raph in some kind of frigging university terrarium. Off his guard.

The two in the front were silent. One driving, one studying Raph's sai.

He went without a fight, and that was his mistake. Guns were just guns, after all. If he tried to get away and they killed him…

Well. Fine. At least then all they would have was a freakishly large turtle corpse, and no one would ever believe Prince if he told them Raph walked and spoke and fought.

Maybe that would be worth it.

He had three brothers to protect. Splinter.

His eyes went to Prince.

Prince was still watching him. "You've got a logical mind. You're capable of predicting outcomes. This is absolutely…you might almost be human. I've got to know your history. I must know what brought you to this state."

Raph curled his hands into fists.

Prince held up his own hand, palm out. "No, no. Don't worry. I don't plan to share this discovery with a soul. You'll not be shown off in any way, you have my word on that."

Feeling the tension all the way down in his toes, Raph snorted. "Why should I take your word about anything?"

Prince regarded him. "I haven't hurt you. I haven't threatened - not more than it took to get you here with me. I am an honest man. My word is good."

"You're a thief!" Raph wasn't ready to relax. Not by far. "Say whatever you want about being a professor of whatever the hell a guy like you would teach, but you're in charge of these clowns who we've caught twice in two nights. Last night? These kids of yours were terrorizing a couple of tourists. Stole their money and talked like they were gonna jump on the girl. You're nothing but a punk like any wallet-grabbing punk I've ever faced down. Just 'cause you have nicer words don't mean you're anything like an honest man."

Prince somehow smiled even wider. "Do you have a name?"

Raph hesitated.

Prince nodded. "Perhaps later. Listen, my friend. I could teach you, as I teach these men who study with me, about this world we live in. About this stolen land, this government that robs its citizens blind. This corrupt world. What we do? It is the only honest thing left. To steal openly is the only real truth. The things we take, the parts they're made of, the labor that created them, they are all backed by thievery and deceit. They are all built on the blood of the poor. There is no such thing as robbery in this world."

Jesus, he sounded like Don and Leo when they got into one of their long-winded debates about whatever bullshit philosophy one of them

was reading about. Don especially could go on and on about the nature of man and truth and good and evil.

Raph? His opinions were more blunt:

"Something doesn't belong to you and you take it anyway. That's robbery. That's a crime, and that's why you're nothing but a punk."

"'You'll learn." Prince sat back, relaxed and confident. "You can obviously be taught, and I will teach you."

"Why?"

Prince tilted his head.

"You said it yourself. I'm a freak, some scientific discovery you just made. Why the hell would you want to grab me up just to hold me hostage and teach me things? What kind of nut job are you?"

"I'm not crazy, I assure you of that."

"All the crazies say that," Raph retorted.

"Maybe they're right," Prince answered, serene. "I wasn't sure of my intentions tonight. Simply to see who hurt my students, and why they reported being attacked by a giant rabid animal led by a deranged hockey player."

Raph would have laughed at that description any other time.

"I wanted to see you for myself. Once I saw you fighting, it occurred to me that you might be useful. Not that friend of yours - he is a brawler, indelicate, and my men won't learn anything from him. But you have obviously been well trained, and could teach them a thing or two about defense."

Raph gaped at him, at the idea that he'd ever even consider it.

"Now?" Prince shook his head, looking delighted by the possibilities. "We must learn from each other. There is so much I can teach you, and so much I must learn. Your existence is an impossibility, but here you are. Every word you speak fascinates me more."

The guy was a lunatic. He had to be.

"And what happens when I say no? You just kidnapped me, pal. You threatened my friend, you threatened me. You're the bad guy here, and I got no interest in learning or teaching. So what happens now?"

Prince gave the same serene smile. "If this lesson were optional, I'd be disappointed at your refusal. But as you've pointed out, we are armed, we have taken you. You're in no position to refuse, and I have the luxury of not having to request."

So he still had to get his ass out of there, before they got to wherever they were headed.

No surprise there. Raph just had to get over how surreal this night had become - he was supposed to be fighting bad guys, not planning his escape from a mad philosopher.

He looked to the front seat, and found himself wondering about the two guys sitting there. How the hell had they gone from students at some university to robbing people under the rule of their professor? How did Prince talk them into it? How did he get away with it? Not one of them had the decency to realize this was wrong, to report the guy and get his ass thrown in jail?

He was curious, but not so curious that he was willing to stay around and ask questions.

"You won't succeed."

Raph looked over sharply as Prince spoke. "What?"

"You're planning to make a break for it."

The two men in the front tensed, and the one had his gun in his hand and Raph's sai out of sight in a flash.

Prince was calm as ever. "You're planning to use me to convince my men to stop and let you out. But it won't succeed."

"Worth the risk, I think," Raph said, fists clenching.

"Not at all. You won't kill me - you're a self-professed 'good guy', after all, and though I think you'd be able to bluff amazingly well, my men are not idiots. Without the threat of my death to stop them, they would easily subdue you. They might kill you, of course. But I have a feeling if we go back to the spot we found you, your masked friend might lead us to more just like you."

The guy was too fucking perceptive. Raph bared his teeth, furious and trying like hell not to be rash. He had to think of his brothers, of Splinter and Casey. He had to do what was best for them.

Damn it.

Prince practically beamed as Raph sat back. "You would surrender to protect your friends! You truly are a good guy. I'm glad. It makes you so easy to control."

Raph's anger flared up all over again.

Prince laughed, and in that laugh were traces of the madness he didn't seem to show otherwise. His eyes glinted with a wildness that his calm demeanor couldn't conceal entirely.

Power, Raph thought. The guy got off on it, and it had nothing to do with teaching. He ruled these guys because they let him. He grabbed Raph because he could, and now he'd do his best to subdue him, because he needed to have that much more power.

Raph stared ahead, silent and waiting. Satisfied now that though he wouldn't get away yet, he was getting an idea how he would

eventually.

Because big words and pretty ideas aside, this man was just one more Shredder. Just one more sociopathic nutcase who couldn't stand not to rule over everything he saw.

Raph wasn't scared of it, because it's what he knew. One more megalomaniac to put on the list.

Chapter 5

Sometimes the sewers seemed to stretch on forever. Closer to the street the tunnels were narrow, stinking. Clogged. Dripping and closed-in.

Too many noises from above. Too much filth. Litter from topside - paper and cups and bottles, molded food, discarded needles crammed with God only knew what kind of infections. Even in the modern, Disneyfied, police-crammed Times Square, one only had to look six feet below the surface to see that New York was as foul as it ever had been.

Don kept his dark thoughts to himself, of course. They were traveling in silence, slogging heavy feet through the filth. There was a subway turn and a couple of pipes to go, and then they would be out of the dripping slime of the functioning sewer system.

Casey wasn't complaining as they trailed one after the other through the grimy darkness. That in itself was a rarity, and any other time one of them might have commented on it.

Leo, leading them as always, was radiating so much energy Don could feel it from the end of the line. He had a way of walking when he was truly furious - with his shoulders straight back and fists squeezing at his side. Vibrating with tension.

Casey followed Leo, quiet and glowering.

Mike was next, staying close to Don though he didn't say a word. Don caught sight of his worried, wide-eyed gaze now and then, but mostly they kept to themselves. There was nothing to talk about - not yet. Nothing to say that would do any good.

Leo led the way down the dip in the corridor, slogging from clammy wetness to cool dryness. It was always a relief to leave the signs of

the city behind, but Don didn't speak about it.

Mike didn't even give him one of those faces he'd usually make, all wrinkled and disgusted.

Don looked back now and then, but the dead silence behind was a sure sign no one was following - the sewers echoed, and his ears were trained.

Besides, the enemy in this case had no need to follow them. They had all the leverage they needed.

Splinter was in the wide, domed living room when they entered. He watched them, silent and waiting. If he was surprised by the tension, he didn't show it. If he were worried when only the four of them came in, he contained it.

He trusted them to tell him what he would want to know.

Leo went to him, standing stiff-backed. "Sensei." Even his voice was tight, taut and ready to snap. "Raphael has been taken."

Don and Mike moved to either side of Leo, and Casey hung back. Don watched his master's face.

Splinter had always been good at concealing his thoughts. Even as they were growing up, making stupid mistakes and squealing their childish problems, he would take it all in impassively, turn it into lessons for them to learn.

But with age his control had slipped.

His head bowed. "Taken by whom?"

Leo turned a cool glare to Casey.

Casey cleared his throat, awkward as he ever was when dealing with Splinter. "We were going up against these guys--"

"How many?" Splinter interrupted, brown eyes rising to pierce into Casey.

Don didn't envy Casey that look. Splinter could tear down any one of them with the right gaze.

Casey moved up, coming to Don's other side. "I dunno, maybe fifteen last night, and just a handful tonight. So we thought."

"Two against fifteen. I see. Continue."

Casey looked to the side.

Don returned his glance, but none of the turtles came to his aide. In his heart Don wondered if he didn't blame Casey for this mess the way Leo obviously did.

"Uh. They got a little carried away last night, and we didn't manage to get our hands on 'em. So we went back."

"Carried away." Splinter never had been one to settle for vague language.

Casey blew out a breath. "They were packing guns and Raph took a sting in the arm. That's all."

Splinter's gaze seemed to sharpen at that.

The words might as well have been spoken out loud. *My son took a wound from a gun and you dare tell me 'that's all?* '

Casey dropped his eyes. "We went back hoping to bring 'em in. They're bad news, we couldn't just let 'em go."

"They ambushed you and took Raphael." Splinter wasn't asking.

Casey fell silent.

Splinter's eyes moved from one to the next. "We have no idea who these men are?"

"None, master." Leo spoke tersely. "They left no trail - we think they were driving."

Splinter's eyes shifted. His mouth twitched. For a moment, though, he held his tongue. Then he looked at Casey.

"You will return to the place my son was taken, and wait for a sign of return."

If Casey was tempted to bristle under a direct order, he was smart enough to stifle it. He backed away, nodding, and turned to flee the site of interrogation.

Splinter's head bent once Casey was gone.

In the pause Mikey spoke, voice subdued. "We don't think he was hurt. Casey said the guy in charge just wanted to talk, and we couldn't find any sign of blood, or…" He trailed off, uncertain.

Don could feel Leo thrumming against him, just the mention of blood enough to have him tense and ready to move.

It was almost funny - Raphael and Leo were on each other's cases so often, yet when Leo wasn't around Raph stepped right into responsible-leader mode - or as close as he could manage. And now that something had happened to Raph, Leo was vibrating with the need to go out and bust some heads open until they got their brother back.

It was a grounding thought.

If Mike were to disappear, would anyone be able to take up his place and offer some kind of optimism and humor? And Don himself? He imagined he served as a kind of conscience for his brothers, a

rational side. Logical. Which one of them would fill that gap if he were to go missing?

It was easy to forget when they were stuck together bickering for weeks at a time, but every one of them was so entirely vital to the family that the absence of one was devastating.

He shook away his grim thoughts when Splinter looked up again.

"Michelangelo, contact Miss O'Neil. We could use her help. Donatello, if you have a proper description of these men, search for reports of criminals matching the description, and perhaps track down a central location for them. Leonardo, you will tell me everything that you know, from start to finish."

The fear was gone from the old rat's voice, leaving just the sharpness of a father commanding his sons.

And without hesitation, glad of the guidance, the brothers obeyed his orders.

Raphael looked up in vague interest as they pulled through a gate and up to their location.

Apparently mad professors with delusions of moral superiority liked to take their hostages home with them.

At least he assumed the large house belonged to Prince. It had to cost a fortune - they were in Brooklyn now, and just the property and the gated drive would hike up costs sky high. The house itself was mid-sized - a two-story sectional that must've been built in the late 1800s. Sturdy and old, but cared for.

Crime paid, no matter what the PSAs on TV said.

The gate shut behind the jeep, and the door to the house opened. Another man stepped out, black-clad, orange-haired. He didn't

bother disguising his gaping stare as Raph was guided out of the jeep.

There were even more men inside. Lounging, looking for all the world like frat guys hanging around their house. Beer bottles in hand, TV on in another room.

But they all stood when Prince came in, and they all turned their eyes to Raph when he was pushed in after the professor.

Raph met their stares, stretching to his full height and folding his arms over his chest, glowering hotly.

Uncertain looks turned to Prince.

Prince just chuckled, taking in the show. "Come, my friend."

Raph cocked an eyebrow upward. "You use that word pretty loosely."

The sound of his voice sent a ripple of double-takes and murmurs through the men.

"You won't tell me your name. I suppose I could call you 'freak'."

Raph faced him instantly.

Prince smiled. "See the hostility that would cause? Now, please, follow me."

There were still guns held in the loose hands of the two from the jeep, and Raph really didn't have the option of refusal. He moved after Prince, throwing his glare back at the men crowding the front room of the house.

He was almost amused when the nearest one shrank back.

The red-haired man who appeared at the doorway walked side by side with Prince, and the two spoke in soft words Raph couldn't

make out. They went down a narrow hallway to a door, and opened it to reveal stars going downward.

Basement. Great.

Raph glanced behind him. The one idiot from the car had his sai clenched awkwardly in his fist. Raph's hands twitched to rear back and grab them, but he contained himself.

Until they moved into the basement and he saw what was waiting for him.

He stopped instantly, fisting his hands and looking back at his sai.

"Relax, my friend. As you can see, you're well outnumbered here. This is…dramatic, yes, but you've made it necessary."

Raph's eyes flitted ahead.

The basement was crowded with shelves and cases full of what had to be stolen merchandise from their nightly raids. But the corner, a good portion, was taken up by a man-sized steel-barred cage.

Raph spoke in a growl. "Mind telling me what a professor's doing with that in his basement?"

"Our excursions have gotten us some rather interesting acquisitions." Prince moved to the cage, pulling open a heavy door. "One night we stopped a truck that we were told carried imports from Asia. We found a Bengal tiger in this cage. It was a spur of the moment choice to keep the cage, but one that's paying off now. Please, inside."

Raph stood where he was. "What happened to the tiger?"

"You didn't see the rug upstairs?" Prince's eyes flashed, that bright hint of mania in his face for just a moment.

"Get inside." One of the men behind him spoke, voice low.

Raph didn't move until he felt the coolness of a gun barrel against his neck. He moved forward, hesitating again at the door to the cage. Bad news, getting in there. He had a real sinking feeling that it was a mistake, just as big as going with these guys in the first place.

But hands reached out and shoved him, and the door clanged behind before he caught his feet.

His hands curled around the bars of the door and pushed. Of course the door didn't budge.

He focused past the bars, to Prince.

Prince spoke to his red-haired companion. "He's magnificent, isn't he?"

"He's amazing," the other man agreed, studying Raph.

Prince approached the cage, gesturing the other man with him. "This is Terrance. My student aide, originally. My right hand. You'll see him often."

Raph looked the redhead up and down, unimpressed. "Terry, huh? Listen, Terry, tell your boyfriend over there that putting me in a cage doesn't change anything. He's not getting a thing from me, and if he comes in trying to teach me whatever lessons he's brainwashed you all with, I'm gonna make like a real zoo animal and throw shit in his face."

Prince's smile vanished even as Terrence went as red as his hair.

"You need to learn right now, turtle. You're in my home, and if you dare disrespect me in my home I will make you pay for it."

Raph's lips curled. "I'm terrified."

"My interest lies with your mind, your history. You should be content with that. My students come from all walks of life with all different

interests. I am sure there are those among them who would be interested to know what makes a giant turtle scream."

Raph's gut tightened, but he smirked. "Dramatic, Teach. If any of those clowns are brave enough to step in here and try it, let 'em come."

"We don't need to come in."

Raph's eyes darted to the side, where one of Prince's lackeys stood against the bars of the cage. Raphael realized that he was right - the cage was large, but just small enough that there was nowhere he could stand out of range of weapons extended through the bars.

The guy beside the cage was toying with one of his sai, and Raph's eyes caught on it.

"Try it, then," he said fast. No question in his mind that he could knock the weapon out of the clown's hand and get it back.

"Not now." Prince spoke sharply. "In fact, everyone out." His voice eased again. "Our guest is settling in, and bound to be hostile. We'll give him some time to soften up."

Raph laughed. "Gonna take more than time, fucker."

Prince stood stiff and straight. Obviously the man had some pride issue that didn't make him respond well to being insulted in his home, in front of his guys.

Raph could use that. He knew enough about that kind of rash pride - he had it in spades, and it was getting dumped all over at that moment.

Prince extended a hand to one of his men, grasping the revolver from his hand. "You're right. I'll help speed the process along. You need to learn just how weak you are here." He aimed, looking carefully over the barrel.

Raph didn't bother backing up - if Prince was going to shoot there was nowhere he could go. He sneered, because it was all he had left as defiance. "You gonna dirty your hands, professor?"

Prince met his eyes, and the twist of instability flickered over his face.

Raph realized he was going to shoot the instant before the blast of the revolver boomed through the basement.

He stumbled back, blinking as hot weight punched him in the arm, near his shoulder. A hand came up instinctively, but jerked back at the alien, sickening feeling of blood pumping from him. Too much blood.

He looked down in shock. Red, falling fast. The white-hot searing of muscle and skin torn through.

Not fatal, his mind diagnosed instantly. He was battle-practiced enough to realize that. Not fatal, but Prince was right. It was more than enough to leave him weak and helpless, if he wasn't bandaged.

By the time he looked up again, he saw the last couple of black-clad forms disappearing up the stairs.

He stumbled to the bars, and slid down to the floor of the cage. His eye mask slipped off easily, but untying it to wrap around the wound was impossible with one hand numbed in pain. In the end he pressed the red fabric against the darker red wound and sat, stunned.

Fear crawled over him in the silence, heavy and cold.

Chapter 6

Mike opened his eyes, blowing out a deep sigh.

Over his head the black pipes that stretched all over their lair split the darkness. Dark against dark, and it was a grim thing to stare at late at night when he should have been sleeping.

He was exhausted. They'd gone out for hours, scouring that damned parking lot, talking to April, looking up reported crimes in the area. No one went to bed until the sky lit pale and grey with dawn.

But he knew he wasn't going to sleep. How could he? How could any of them?

He surrendered, pushing to his feet off his narrow bed and moving on heavy feet through his dark room.

In the large living room his brothers sat, their quiet talk silencing as he came in. Splinter wasn't in sight; his door was tightly shut but Mike had no doubt he was as wide-awake as the rest of them.

"Morning," Don greeted him with a flat version of a smile.

Mike returned that look with a twin. "Could've told me you were up."

"We knew you'd come out either way." Don shrugged, patting the back of the couch beside him. "Come on."

Mike dragged himself over and sat. His looked to Leo, who was unusually quiet.

Leo's mask was off, and it made him look especially bare and bleak as he sat. Mike's eyes went back to Donnie.

Don shrugged, eyes sad. "Should I make some breakfast?"

Leo's mouth tightened, but he didn't answer.

Too serious. Mike studied him. "Is something going on?"

Leo shot him a glare. "You didn't notice the missing brother?"

Mike raised his brows, but answered easily and without anger. "Besides that. You look like you've gotten bad news. We know Raph can take care of himself. You look like you've…"

Leo glared at him, but after a moment his eyes dropped and he sighed. "No. Nothing's happened. I'm just…We were so *close* . Things were almost okay. Why do the bad things always have to come when things are finally alright?"

"Don't worry, Leo." Don reached over, touched his arm. "We'll be out there again as soon as the sun sets, and April and Casey are doing all they can during the day. We'll get him back."

Leo hesitated, looking from Don to Mike.

There was definitely more there. Mike wasn't as perceptive about those things as Don was, but Leo might as well have been flashing in neon that something was on his mind.

He and Don knew Leo well, and both kept quiet. Leo would approach these things in his own time, if he did at all.

He did, after a long pause. "Raph was talking strangely before Casey showed up last night."

Don nodded. "The night before, too."

Mike frowned from one to the other. "Well, he didn't talk to me. What do you mean, talking strangely?"

Leo and Don exchanged looks. "Like…funny." Don blew out a breath. "Not like Raph, anyway."

"He was asking questions, about us and what we do. About how we don't fit in topside, and why we should bother fighting."

Mike blinked. Yeah, for Raph that was funny, and not in any good way.

Leo rubbed his eyes, tired and showing it. "I wanted to talk about it more. I think we might have if Casey hadn't shown up. Talking, I mean…it's pulling teeth with Raph, but he was offering."

"He'll offer again." Mike sat up, chin lofting with certainty. "He'll be back and you'll be tearing into each other in no time."

"He'd better." Leo's face hardened again. "And there'd better not be a scratch on him, or these bastards will live to regret--"

"Leonardo."

Leo's mouth clamped shut as the three turned.

Splinter stood in his doorway, slumped and bright-eyed. "Talking that way does no good for any of your brothers."

"I'm sorry, sensei." Leo bowed his head, but looked up a moment later with fierce eyes. "Casey says they were shooting to kill the night before, when Raph got hurt. If they kill him…"

Splinter sighed. He shuffled slowly into the room, and Mike twitched to keep from getting up to help him. He was old, and it showed. But he was strong still, and proud.

He moved in and stood, looking at the three of them. "Vengeance is a spirit I don't condone. We master our emotions to keep those demons at bay, to keep from letting our own darkness emerge and take the lives of others."

"Yes, master. But from what Casey said…" Leo hesitated.

Mike frowned, wanting to snap at Leo to stop arguing and doomsaying and predicting the worst. That kind of cynicism was Raph's area, and it didn't really help anything.

Splinter shuffled slowly to where Leo sat. He lay a furred hand on Leo's shoulder. "Do not let your hunger for revenge overpower you while we still lack something to avenge. Do not bury Raphael so quickly. It is likely that he is alive." His mouth tightened, and he looked to Mike and Don.

Mike almost shivered at the look in Splinter's eyes. Those emotions he was so good at stifling peeked through his eyes, and Mike easily caught sight of flickers of the same fierce vengeance Leo was throbbing with.

Splinter spoke in a rumble. "If he is other than alive when we find him, then is the time for vengeance."

Leo looked up at that, and his eyes gleamed.

Mike frowned. "But, master. You said that--"

"It is not the true spirit of a ninja to seek revenge." Splinter returned Mike's gaze. "But it is the spirit of a parent."

Raphael couldn't help a laugh. His eyes peeled open and he slumped back against the bars.

His arm hurt like hell, and he was worried and tense and - strangely-bored. So he thought to do the one thing he never had the patience for.

He tried to meditate.

Splinter and Leo could talk for hours about the benefits of meditation, of finding a calm place inside themselves and visiting there in the silence of a still room and an empty mind.

Raph? It wasn't really his thing. He was too impatient and too fidgety. But hell, he was in a cage, he was lightheaded and alone in the dark. He wasn't going anywhere.

And if he didn't try to clear his mind, all he could think about was the pain in his arm, and the look in Prince's eyes right before he shot.

It wasn't the worst thing about the situation. He could handle bad guys lobbing threats. He could handle a tear in his arm. The worst part was being in a basement in some Brooklyn home, locked in a dead tiger's cage and waiting.

It was the waiting.

Prince was unstable, no doubt about that. From talking philosophy on the way there to shooting him in the frigging arm just for mouthing off, the guy had to be loony. The trouble with loonies was there was no way to tell what they were after, or what they'd be like from one minute to the next.

It made waiting a frustrating, exhausting, scary experience.

So. Meditation.

Only Raph had been so half-assing it for so many years, he couldn't frigging do it. He could sit in as stiff a position as Leo could manage, and shut his eyes and breathe evenly and everything. But his mind just refused to stop going.

Hell, he didn't doubt the value of meditating. He and his brothers had managed to come together when it was most needed and actually communicate with Splinter from a farmhouse upstate. That kind of thing wasn't a joke.

He just couldn't do it.

That's what had him laughing, in pain on the ground in a cage. The irony of it. The one time a guy wanted to sit on his ass and

contemplate his naval, it wasn't happening.

He wondered idly if Prince would point out that he had no naval. He'd probably throw in some exclamation about how fascinating that was.

Psycho.

Fuck, his arm hurt.

The bleeding had stopped, at least. His band had soaked through. There was the dark brown of itchy dried blood down his arm and splattered on his plastron, but hell if he could do anything about it.

He couldn't do anything about any damned thing. Maybe it was that frustration that kept his mind from working the way Splinter had tried to train it to work.

Maybe Raph was just a bad student.

When the door opened and footsteps padded down the stairs, it wasn't Prince or his nameless black-clad kiddies. It was that redhead, Terrance - Prince's right hand guy.

He was dressed like any normal guy - jeans, a Red Wings jersey Casey would have approved of. He looked like a normal college kid.

Which was what he was, Raph realized. They all were. Prince wasn't around because he was at some college teaching the next generation lessons about humanity.

There was some fucking irony in that.

He got to his feet when Terrance came into view. Slow, weaker than he thought he'd be, but he stood steady on his own to face the possible threat.

Terrance's eyes were round, rapt on his every movement. "What do you eat?"

Raph hardened his expression. "Same thing anyone else does," he said, sullen and exhausted.

Terrance approached the cage, hesitant the closer he got. "You know, he means well."

Raph blinked at him, and looked down at his red-stained arm deliberately.

Terrance followed his gaze and winced. "That was unexpected, sorry. Professor Prince is a genius. The most brilliant man I've ever met. I guess geniuses can get…eccentric."

Raph snorted. Brainwashed yuppie punk.

His first instinct was right, he thought, looking at the reasonable-seeming young man willing to rob and hurt and cover for some professor who taught him 'truths'.

"This really is a fucking cult."

Terrance tensed. "Don't say that. It's nothing like that. All of us are free to come and go as we wish. He doesn't ask us for a thing. All he expects is that we learn."

"And carry guns, and hold prisoners."

Terrance hesitated. "I…only came to get you breakfast."

"You in school to learn to be a hood? 'Cause that's all you're learning here."

"No!" Terrance moved in, earnest. "No. He teaches us about the world. Honesty and dishonesty are illusions. This entire city is just lies built on stolen land using the blood of the poor."

"Which has what to do with taking a guy's wallet?"

Terrance's mouth pursed. "You don't understand, that's all."

"I don't understand because it's bullshit. I don't get how you can add one plus one and get *bullshit* ."

"They're practical lessons. If you heard him speak you would--"

"What would happen if one of you wised up and threatened to go to the cops about this? What would he do?"

Terrance fell silent.

"Would killing you make some statement about honesty?" Raph looked out at Terrance, but even as he focused on the guy his vision blurred and doubled, and he felt his balance shifting beneath him.

He reached out, took hold of the bars with his good arm. Tried to shake the dizziness out. Too much blood gone. On top of not sleeping, it made him too frigging weak.

Terrance spoke after a moment, stilted. "You need food. I'll be back."

Raph couldn't find the voice to argue, so he stood and breathed and tried to make the world stop spinning.

The tension from the two humans radiated like light from a bulb from the moment they ducked into the lair.

April's stiff-backed posture and tight mouth spoke of her anger, and Casey, subdued, was obviously the target.

Leo felt a dark shot of approval run through him. April had never been one to tolerate silently as Raph and Casey made like superheroes. She called them careless and rash, and she placed the blame squarely on Casey.

Leo silently agreed. He knew Raph - he knew his brother would be up there fighting. Raph was too restless, too claustrophobic if he didn't get topside enough. But Raph wasn't dumb. It was Casey that

encouraged him to jump gangs of bad guys, fight even when it was more dangerous than it was worth. Or go back to face a group a second night in a row, even though he knew full well they were armed.

But he didn't say anything, not to Casey or April.

"I've been checking every place I could, listening for anything at all odd. There's been nothing so far." April's eyes were bright with worry - she and Raph had always been close. "If anyone was going to make a big public spectacle out of catching a giant turtle, they probably would have by now."

That was a relief, in a way, but Leo didn't speak up. He let Splinter and Donnie handle the questions. His eyes kept going to Casey, narrowed and angry, but he reminded himself that Casey was trying to help. Trying to make right what he'd screwed up so badly.

Then again, it was possible Leo was being unfair. It wasn't like Raph was an unwilling participant in their little jaunts together.

He frowned, looking away as Casey reported failure after failure. No one back at the parking lot, no gangs of guys dressed in black walking around waiting to be found.

And without that, they were pretty much screwed.

That was the worst part of it all. New York was too big, and there were too many places to go without leaving a trail. There was simply no way to start searching.

That, of course, wasn't about to stop them from trying.

Chapter 7

"You're a stubborn creature, aren't you?"

Raphael sneered. His eyes stayed on the wall, unfocused and uncaring.

Prince, sitting to the side of the cage in a worn armchair brought downstairs apparently just so he could be comfortable while tormenting his prisoner, had been trying for a while to get him to talk.

But Raph was done with him. Done with the whole thing.

"I wonder, if there are others like you out there, do they behave the same?"

He tried not to tense - Prince had to have seen his strong reactions whenever he speculated about others. Couldn't let that be his weakness.

"Is this hostility your animal instinct coming out, or is it a distinct personality that you alone possess?" Prince's voice was low, thoughtful. Scholarly, Raph supposed, though he still couldn't imagine 'Professor Prince'.

This hostility comes from you shooting me in the arm and putting me in a cage, asshole. Raph kept the thought to himself.

Prince sighed.

Raph rolled his injured arm experimentally. It was still numb and aching, and he wondered if there was going to be real damage there. He'd seen TV shows and bad movies where people got shot in the arm, wore a sling for a day, and were aces after that. But bullets were traumatic wherever they hit. They shredded flesh, ripped muscle. There was no safe place to be shot.

"Your friend has come sniffing after you, you know. My men saw him looking around today."

Raph frowned. Casey'd poke around during the day, but come nighttime Leo, Don and Mike would go with him. If Prince had guys out there watching…

"My men could very easily have taken him as well. He is careless, too distracted to guard himself properly."

Raph glanced over.

Prince sat up when he saw he had Raph's attention. "Should we bring him here? Maybe it if were him we were threatening you would be more inclined to talk."

Raph thought about his brothers. They'd come out that night. They wouldn't be ambushed - they'd never be that distracted. But Prince had more than enough men with more than enough guns.

He spoke, his voice hoarse. "I talk to you you'll leave him be?"

Prince smiled. "I wouldn't be averse to such a deal."

Raph frowned at the vague answer. He would have made Prince promise if he thought Prince had anything like honor.

He shifted uncomfortably to face the loony professor. "What do you want to know?"

"Do you have a name?"

Raph hesitated, but supposed there was no real harm in it. "Raphael."

"Indeed?" Prince's eyebrows rose. "You know there was quite a famous artist--"

"Yeah. Italian. Renaissance. I was named after him."

Prince seemed utterly delighted. He sat back, studying Raph with digging eyes. "The orphaned master. How interesting. Who is it who gave you such a name?"

"None of your business."

Prince regarded him.

Raph glared out at him. "Ask me whatever you want about me. I didn't make any deals to tell you about anyone else."

Prince nodded after a moment. "That seems fair. For now. Keep in mind, of course, that Raphael Sanzio died young."

Raph blinked. "That a threat?"

"Of a sort." But Prince was still in his amiable mode, still smiling. He leaned in, uncrossing his legs and resting his elbows on his knees as he studied Raph. "'Nature was afraid to be won by him,'" he said, thoughtful.

Raph waited.

"That's a translation of part of the inscription on Raphael's tombstone. And here you are, an accident of nature, perhaps against nature, carrying the same name."

"Look, pal, anytime you want to stop talking about what a big freak I am feel free. It might keep things a little more pleasant here."

Prince chuckled, sitting back again. "Fair enough. Do you have some clue as to how you got this way?"

Raph hesitated. TGRI and radioactive ooze was too specific, gave too many facts. He played it safe. "Not a clue, and I'm fine not digging for answers."

"Indeed. Instead you spend your nights stopping crimes. Why is that?"

Raph smirked, remembering how he had asked his brothers the same thing. "Nothing better to do," he offered.

"You've been trained to fight."

"Yeah." His shoulders squared.

Prince held up a hand. "I won't ask by whom. Not yet. But you take that knowledge and you come into the world of humans. You stay in darkness and fight. There's got to be a reason why. Surely you have no real place in this world."

Raph frowned past Prince, too weak to stand and pace as he might have done any other time. Too weak to even shift against the bars digging in to his shell. So weak, in fact, that he actually kept talking to the man responsible, rather than telling him off the way he should have.

"There's a place for me. Got to be, 'cause I'm here."

"But you stay in the darkness. You wear disguises. You hide what you are from even the people you try to help."

Raph glanced down at his lap. "The reason for that should be pretty damned obvious."

"No. I mean, yes, but…why would you actively protect a world that you can't let yourself be a part of? Do you feel longing for what you're missing? Some desire to belong to the world that makes you choose this path?"

"You want to know if I'd be fighting if I wasn't a big frigging turtle, is that it?"

"Good enough for a start, yes."

He thought about it. "There's no way to really answer that. I don't have the first clue what a human life is actually like. I might've done a hundred other things."

"You've never thought about it?"

"Of course I've thought about it!" Raph looked out with hard eyes. "Lately I can't think of anything else. All my life we've…" He caught himself - too late, but maybe Prince wouldn't ask. "I've trained and fought and tried to keep people safe. I don't even know what I'm protecting. Life, sure, but what kind of life? I doubt you people live anything like the crap on TV, and that's the biggest reference point I've got."

"Your human friend?"

Raph shrugged. "He tells stories about his life before he put on a mask and starting beating up shits with a baseball bat, and none of it makes any sense to me. Hell, to be honest I don't know why he does what he does. He could do anything he wanted. He could belong. But he might as well be a big turtle himself, the way he lives."

Prince regarded him, watery eyes thoughtful. "I expect you look at humans and see us as some great tribe all working and living together."

Raph shrugged.

"No wonder, then, you have a hard time understanding my actions."

"This the part where you rationalize your gang of pick-pockets?" Raph let his head drop back against the bars, tired. "'Cause your boys have tried that, and it don't work."

"Raphael. Hear me out."

He frowned, not liking the sound of his name from that creep's voice. But he looked back at him.

"You and your own…group, whoever taught you and trained you, and whoever else trains with you. You must be loyal to each other.

That is your experience. If one of you ever stepped out of line and committed a crime against the others…"

Raph snorted.

Prince seemed to understand his reaction. "I'm sure it's hard to imagine. Now, hear me when I say this, because it's important: human beings are nothing like that."

Prince paused, and in the silence Raph's mind played over those words. He looked to Prince, actually curious.

Prince returned the gaze, earnest, his eyes sharp. "We don't grow up with some notion of solidarity towards each other. It's exactly the opposite. From the day we're born we're taught to hate one another."

Raph thought about the two humans he knew best - April. Casey. He shook his head, disbelieving.

Prince spoke, solemn. "Study human history. Our entire civilization is built on warfare, on intolerance, violence. Even today. We hate because of religion, because of skin color. We purport superiority over our fellow man because they are a different social level, different gender. A weight or an age that doesn't meet our ideals. We claim rule over those in poorer countries, or those with no interest in waging war to stop us. We separate ourselves. We divide into tiny groups of others who are just like us, and then in those groups we establish ranks."

He sat back, and Raph could see him for the first time as a professor, standing in front of a crowd of kids and extolling knowledge. As he understood it, at any rate.

"We claim dominion over women, over the poor. We harp in our most religious, sacred doctrines that we are superior to all those different. It is our earth. Our place to rule, over land and over animals." He gestured at Raph expansively. "There is no family understanding among humans. We don't celebrate similarities. We punish

differences. Were you born human, Raphael, you might be more alone than you are now."

Raph looked away from him, troubled by his words.

His eyes caught on the staircase leading to the first floor of the house.

Terrance stood, silent and unnoticed by Prince. There was a tray of food, Raph's dinner most likey, forgotten in his hands. He was listening to his professor with a straight back and a proud smile.

Prince continued without a pause. "Do you see why regarding any behavior as criminal is simply absurd? Our world is built on hatred. Greed feeds that hatred. What we do here is openly indulge in the behaviors we're taught in our lives, without the façade of civility that most people cling to. We…" He paused, his gestures extravagant. "We are the future, the inevitable next stage of the human race.

"That is the project I teach my students. And that's why they follow me. This isn't some family of devoted brothers. This is greed in its one pure form. These boys are selfish, crafty. Full of disdain. As they damn well should be."

Raph's eyes went from Terrance to Prince. "And you don't care a damn thing about any one of them, do you?"

Prince chuckled. "Of course not, and they know it."

Rah's eyes flickered back to Terrance. Terrance was a faithful acolate, and Raph had sensed the pride and faith in his eyes when he'd talked to Raph about his professor. Prince's inability to care would've made him blind to devotion from his students.

Sure enough, Terry's smile was fading fast.

"You must feel something," Raph said, his heart beating faster at the potential of what was happening there. A chance to help himself, to

hurt his enemy. As Splinter had trained them, his eyes were always open for opportunities. "You trust these guys with your life, don't you? What if one of 'em wanted out and decided to take you down?"

Prince laughed, waving a hand carelessly. "I screen the students I bring to these special projects. You'll notice there are no women present, though a good many of my students are women. They are too emotional, and too rash. These men are thoughtful, lacking in confidence. If they have doubts I trust them to come to me about them."

Raph stared hard at Prince. "And what happens then?"

Prince smiled. "I've seen you fight, Raphael. I know you're not naïve."

Raph nodded. He'd suspected as much. No one was so good that he could talk good kids into crime without having a few objectors.

"So where does murder fit into that moral scale of yours?" he asked, loud enough for his voice to carry to the stairs.

"It's a handy tool. I have men here who are loyal enough to kill at my order. Most of the time I can convince them it was their idea in the first place."

"You pick the ones that aren't so bright, huh?" Raph had to resist looking back at Terry - he didn't want to clue Prince in to their silent audience.

Terry was his 'right hand', Prince had said. Odds were that meant he had some blood on his hands.

He spoke fast. "The ones who know about the murders, though. They could ruin you entirely."

Prince shook his head. "No, no. The bodies are on their consciences, not mine. Those men even more than the others

belong to me entirely."

Raph couldn't resist looking.

Terrance was pale, his eyes wide and shocked.

Raph didn't envy the guy - he was hearing the first real truth he might've ever heard from Prince.

"Tell me, Raphael. Do you begin to see what…"

Raph looked back at Prince just as Prince noticed his wayward gaze and turned his head to look behind.

Terrance stared at his teacher.

Prince stood up instantly. "Terrance. Is there something--"

"You lied to us."

"No." Prince spoke fast, that level confidence still thick in his voice. "I never told you--"

"I watched people die because of you. I even..." Stunned, white-faced, Terrance stumbled back and suddenly turned and ran up the stairs.

"Terrance!" Prince moved after him, but turned after only a few steps. He looked back at Raph.

If Raph had been standing, he would have shrunk back from that look.

The maniac was there, in full force and openly displayed. Prince's eyes were so bright they might've glowed, and his face was red.

"You did that on purpose," he ground out through a tight jaw.

Raph's mind was firing klaxons, screaming about danger. But it was done, and he was still in a cage. And hell, he was damn well going to take credit.

"Yeah," he said, sitting back against the bars, casual. "I did."

Prince was gone after another second, taking off after his wayward student.

Raph said a quick, heartfelt prayer that Terry'd run right for the door and peeled the hell out of there. Maybe then he had a chance.

Not much of one, but a chance.

Because when Prince got back, no matter if Terry got away or not, Raph had absolutely no doubt that he'd be enraged and looking to cause pain. If he was willing to shoot Raph over a couple of insults, he would make him suffer hard for this.

He sat in silence, looking at the empty armchair Prince had deserted.

The guy was loony. Raph had never questioned that. But his words, his little speech about history and humanity…something about it rang true. Something about it stuck in his mind, waiting to be pieced into proper place.

His arm throbbed, and he sighed to himself. Quite a fucking mess he had gotten himself into. If Terry really had gotten away, what were the odds he would report Prince to any kind of authority? What was the chance they'd come looking?

Fuck, that wasn't exactly a bonus for Raph. He didn't need to go from prisoner in a basement to exhibit in a zoo.

He needed Terry to magically get in touch with his brothers, so they could come tear these jerks up and get Raph out.

And the odds on that?

He shut his eyes and dropped his head against the bars.

He was screwed.

Prince would come back with his boys and his weapons, and Raph was pretty sure he'd be shooting to kill.

He tried to clear the fear from his mind. He wasn't given to worrying - especially when it was something he had no power over. He barreled into things without thought, and if there were repercussions then bring 'em on, because Raphael could handle any damned thing.

Usually.

He thought about his brothers, what they'd be doing.

Worrying, he had no doubt. Leo would be batting Casey around, blaming him for Raph's mess. Probably blaming himself, thinking about that last sparring match. Hell, at least Leo'd remember him well. At least they left things on a good note.

Mikey'd be real quiet. Raph knew his kid brother. He was a talker. He was big on laughing and making everyone smile, denying their world was as small and dark as it was. But when the bad things happened, and Mike wasn't willing to force smiles, he got really quiet.

Donnie'd be worrying over every possible thing that might be happening. He'd be on his computer, searching the same websites over and over again for mentions of thieves in black. Trying to formulate a plan out of nothing. He'd be pissed at himself when he couldn't do it, too. That was the worst.

Raph thought about Splinter. Splinter was the one he couldn't instantly put an image to. Splinter was a mystery to Raph, even after knowing him all his life. He was similar to Raph - pensive, given to brooding. Only for Splinter it was all pondering and meditating, reflecting. Same thing, Raph thought, but Splinter went about it differently, and came out of it with different reactions.

There was no guessing with Splinter. Maybe he'd be up, ordering the guys around. Maybe he'd be shut in his room. Hell, maybe he'd be making them practice, keeping them sharp.

His eyes still closed, Raph put a picture to his master. Ragged robes and solid presence, sitting cross-legged, focusing. Raph knew every tuft of fur, every whisker. As much as he didn't understand Splinter, he loved him.

It was an awful thing to realize that he'd never really told Splinter that. He had always assumed that the things that really mattered didn't need to be said. But that wasn't true.

The sight of Splinter, even just in his mind's eye, made him burn with guilt.

Splinter…

Raphael.

Raph smiled faintly - he could hear the rasp of the old rat's voice, like a wind touching his mind.

Raphael.

Louder then. Raph nearly opened his eyes, nearly wondered about his own sanity.

Then he realized. He wasn't imagining.

He was succeeding in the lesson.

Raph breathed in and out, slow and deep, trying not to concentrate so much that he broke the calm and pulled himself from the spell.

He tried to reach out, to go beyond the cage and the basement.
Splinter…

My son.

The answer was a blessing, taking away the pain in his arm and the fear in his heart. Raphael had rarely done this on his own, and never so well. But whether it was the fear that aided him or the certainty that he wouldn't live to speak to Splinter in person again, it was strong in him now.

He felt a foreign concern - Splinter wanted to know how he was, where he was.

Raph focused.

He wanted to send back reassurance, to calm his father. But meditation was an honest state. Splinter had taught them that. It had to be: it came from the very root of a person's soul, and there were no lies there.

And so his fear came through clearly. His arm, Prince's madness. His own death, almost inevitable.

No. Splinter's response was firm and strong. Absolute refusal. *We are coming.*

You can't find me, he thought to himself - thought to Splinter. *But it's not your fault. None of it.*

Refusal shouted back at him in Splinter's voice, wordless.

He swallowed, thinking of his brothers. He could hear Splinter because Splinter was strong - it had little to do with his own skills. He knew he'd never be strong enough to reach the guys.

It's alright, my son. Splinter spoke in his mind, soothing as a breeze. *Your brothers know.*

But Raph wasn't content to leave it at that. If this was the last time he would be able to reach them, they had to know more.

Leo had to know that Raph was an idiot, that their fighting was his stupid stubborn attitude refusing to accept his place in the sewers or

as a second to Leo's leadership.

Donnie had to know that he and his science and his computers couldn't see everything. He'd blame himself - they all would, in different ways, but Donnie would keep his inside, where it would hurt the most.

And Mikey…Jesus, it was hard to even think about him. Mike had always held a special place in Raph's heart. Little brother, grinning idiot. Naïve and innocent and too forgiving of his grouchy shit of a brother. Too affected by the bad things. Someone had to tell Mikey that he'd still have his family even if he was hurt or upset and not making everyone laugh.

If Raph hadn't been such a loner asshole he could've told them. Face to face, where those kinds of things should be spoken. But he wasn't. He was him.

Funny thing was, he knew if any one of his brothers were in that cage, they'd be sending him back messages of love and blamelessness. That's what a family was, what it did.

They will know. You must not despair.

Splinter's voice, gravel rolling around in his mind, sent a flash of certainty through him. Family and love and…

And that was what struck him so hard about Prince's words. That was what had bothered him.

Clarity swept over him, over all his broiling emotions, things that had been bothering him before he ever heard of Prince or his little gang.

He felt a flash of triumph, and it made his eyes open and his back straighten.

The door to the basement opened, and footsteps - more than one pair - thudded down the stairs.

His triumph left him.

The moment before his focus snapped entirely and sent Splinter from his mind he cried for help as loud as he could without making a single sound.

Don sat back, rubbing his eyes with the palms of his hands. The words were all starting to swim together, but he couldn't stop. There had to be an update. Had to be a mention.

He had to find it. It was the only way to--

"Donnie?"

He looked up, blinking blurred vision.

Mikey stood in his doorway, his eyes wide and scared.

Don stood instantly. "What?" No. No bad news. He still had places he could check.

"Come out?" Mike held out a hand.

Don stumbled as he moved, and without thought he took Mikey's hand, squeezed it in worried support as they moved into the living space.

Then he saw Splinter, and his heart sank.

Splinter seemed to have aged ten years. His whiskers drooped, his eyes were wet, the fur under them damp with tears. He let Leonardo support him, even leaning on him.

Don spoke without thinking. "What happened?"

Splinter clutched Leo's arm. When he spoke his voice was so rough it was almost unintelligible. "I have spoken with Raphael."

Don stumbled forward a step. Mike moved with him.

No one asked how. No one questioned it. They knew their father and his capabilities.

Splinter held out his other hand towards Don and Mike.

They moved fast to go to him, to crowd around him and hear whatever grim words he planned.

In the end it was short, blunt, and crushing for the three brothers.

"He has said goodbye."

Chapter 8

"Gonna have another corpse to bury tonight, huh?" Raphael looked from Prince, standing at the foot of the stairs, to the men moving to surround his cage.

"No." Prince fixed his cold eyes on Raph. "You forget what you are. No one who sees your body will think in terms of murder. You're an animal. Who would care? They'll only want to dissect it further." His smile was thin, humorless, completely absent of any trace of his normal charisma. "And believe me, Raphael. People will find it. And they will dissect it. You may have lived in the shadows but you'll die exposed."

Raph picked himself up. It took a minute, and it was hard, and he had to grasp the bars to stay on his feet. But he stood all the same, because he was Raphael, and fuck them.

He looked at Prince over the heads of his lackeys. "Said it yourself, Prince. I'm a freak. A giant talking turtle with no place in this world." There was pride in him, for himself and his family and all the things this asshole tried to belittle. Pride that carried his voice over the dozen guys around him. "But I'm more human than you are, you sick fuck."

Prince paled, then flushed deep red. "Don't shoot him. I want to be here when he dies. Make him suffer." Prince sent Raph a last twisted smile then turned, moving up the stairs.

Victory crowded over Raph even as the men crowded his cage.

Prince would never have left without something urgent to do. Odds were that meant that Terry had gotten out and run off, and Prince had to track him down.

Raphael turned from the stairs and looked around at the young faces approaching. Kids, brainwashed by a lunatic. They wouldn't be talked out of it - not now. Not by him.

But he wasn't going to spare them just because deep down they were probably good kids.

He just had to stay conscious long enough to kick some ass.

Casey Jones sat on the rooftop, watching the sun sink down over the skyline.

From the midst of alphabet city the view wasn't so good. Up in Manhattan the rich folks got the good sunsets. But he watched this one all the same.

There'd be a trio of turtles on that roof soon enough. This was where Raph got grabbed, so this was where they looked for him. Even though they'd scoured everything a mile in every direction they didn't have any other place to start from. So, the search.

Before that could start, though, he sat alone and watched the sky go orange through a haze of smog.

April'd been a bitch squared the last few days. Told Casey that things like this were the reason they weren't anything more serious than friends who occasionally fucked. She could never attach herself to a child, she said. And that's all he was.

A child who led his best friend into danger and took off when things got hot.

That wasn't it, though. Casey knew that. Hell, wherever Raph was, if he was still alive, he knew it too.

No one else knew because no one else got how the two of them worked. They weren't family, like the rest of those turtles. They were

partners. They were…

Fuck. They were Raphael and Casey Jones, and if no one else understood them, fuck 'em.

Raph told him to leave, just as he'd have told Raph if that gun-toting fucker had been talking to Casey instead. They weren't about guilt and melodrama and whose-fault-is-this. They knew each other. They knew their strengths and weaknesses. They trusted that the other one could take care of himself. They trusted enough to *let* the other one take care of himself.

This wasn't Casey's fucking fault, damn it.

His hand curled around the mask in his lap and he snorted. "You get profane when you're pissed," he told himself. Should've been Raph saying it. Sounded like Raph in his head.

"Hello?"

He jerked, eyes flashing from the skyline to the parking lot below. "Son of a bitch."

A kid, a red-head in a Wings jersey.

"Is someone up there?"

Casey didn't hesitate. He hadn't seen anyone in that lot the whole time he'd been searching - this had to mean something.

Fucking well better.

And anyway, the asshole couldn't find a Rangers jersey anywhere? He deserved to get jumped on.

He made the jump from the roof to the landing of the fire escape halfway down.

The kid's eyes swung to him, wide.

"Who are you?" Casey had his stick in his hand.

The kid stepped towards the building. "They said you were still hanging around here looking." He looked up the fire escape. "You're the turtle's friend, right?"

Casey was off that fire escape with the kid's jersey in his grip so fast he didn't even feel himself jump.

Raph grinned, breathless, the taste of blood filling his mouth.

The punk with the blade was still screeching, clutching his hand and wailing like a kid looking for mommy.

Raph laughed. Hell, he hadn't quite bitten the finger off entirely. The kid should have been feeling lucky.

Fighting off a crowd from inside a cage was easier than he'd thought. The punks outside had the tough part - getting to him meant sticking their arm between bars and jabbing. Which meant extending their arms right into his reach.

Which meant there were at least five of these clowns nursing broken fingers, gashes in the forearm. And nearly bitten-off thumbs.

He grinned as the screamer was dragging away from the cage by his pals. They huddled, and the others crowding the cage paused their awkward attacks.

"What the hell are we supposed to do now?" one of them asked, glowering at Raph.

Raph grinned back. They thought he'd be weak from his blood-loss. Should've known better. Raphael was never too weak to fight back.

And these kids were still students, as much as they liked to play bad guy. They weren't fighters. They outnumbered him twelve to one, but

all they'd done was give him a few scratches and bruises.

The bars made it too awkward. These guys weren't smart enough to see it.

"We can't just shoot the thing?"

"Prof said no."

Raphael stood in the middle of the cage, fists clenched, grinning fiercely.

"Jesus, Sean's fucking thumb's falling off. We gotta get to a hospital."

"Damn it. Go."

The screecher whose blood was still on Raph's face was led up the stairs by a couple of his pals. He was in tears by the time Raph lost sight of him.

Raph chuckled to himself.

A few of the kids gathered by the stairs, shooting glowers at Raph and talking in mutters.

Raph relaxed, flexing his injured arm. There was still a throbbing numbness going through the injury all the way down to his wrist, but he had gotten in a couple of good blows with it.

Then the cluster seemed to reach a decision, and all eyes turned back to Raph.

He curled his fists, ready. Until one of them said the one thing he'd feared hearing. The one thing that would take away his advantage.

"Open the cage."

The path from their lair across the rooftops to the parking lot Raph had been taken from was getting to be familiar. They took the jumps and ladders without hesitation, making the trip fast.

No words, but after the talk with Splinter no one was in the mood to say much of anything. They went as fast as they had the night before, but the feeling was different.

Leo felt it radiating from his brothers. A lack of hope kept them silent, but sheer grim determination made them quick.

They reached the two-story building that overlooked the parking lot.

Leo, first to make the jump onto the flat roof, froze and held a hand up to his brothers.

There were voices below. One of them was the familiar gruff bass of Casey Jones.

They moved on silent feet to the edge of the roof and Leo peered over.

Casey and a kid, a redhead. Talking, but Casey's eyes were peeled on the roof. Looking so closely that he saw Leo the moment he looked over.

He interrupted the kid's nervous rambling voice. "Leo! Guys! Down here!"

Leo frowned, always hesitant to come out in front of a strange human.

"Leo, get your ass down here right fucking now or I'll come up there and take on all three of you at once. He knows where Raph is and we've already been waiting for like twenty fucking minutes for you to get here."

Leo was on the fire escape the second after he heard his brother's name. They were on the concrete of the parking lot in a flash,

surrounding the wide-eyed young man with Casey.

Even unlocked, the cage was keeping Raph going. As long as he was inside, the fuckers around him could only try to get him one at a time.

He was hurt, tired, and weak. But he was ninja, trained. These kids had no idea how to handle him.

He backed up too close to one side, and hands plunged through the bars and grabbed his arm.

The numbness of the wound vanished under grinding pain as finger dug in right under the wound. He bared his teeth, but before he could recover and try to pull free, firm grips from the other side seized his good arm.

He was held, hands jerked against the bars, his left arm screaming. The next kid to come into the cage grinned.

Raph stood as if helpless until his attacker was inside, and then used the hands holding him against the bars to push himself up and plant his foot in the fucker's chest.

The guy crashed backwards, landing on his back outside the cage.

Raph's arm screamed as he caught his footing, and the pain made his knees slump under him. But he looked out, clear-eyed and ready for the next attacker.

No one else came in. The one he kicked was helped to his feet, and all eyes were off the cage, on the stairs.

Raph looked over, and defeat nearly made him drop.

Prince was back.

Chapter 9

Prince spoke calmly, his eyes on Raphael though he spoke to the humans around him. "We might be compromised. We need to get everything out of here that speaks of our evening acitivities."

A few grumbled words met that announcement - some of these kids, Raph noted, weren't doing this out of blind devotion to their teacher. Some of them were little better than street thugs.

"What about this thing?" came a voice outside the cage.

Prince smiled, thin and uneven. "This creature we kill and leave somewhere public. Where someone is sure to find it." His eyes stayed on Raph, cold. "Well, creature? Any last words before--"

Raph took advantage of Prince's big mouth. In the middle of whatever threat Prince was about to voice he surged, ripping his good arm from the grip holding him against the bars. He jumped at the other side, jerking his injured arm in even as he jabbed a sharp blow at the idiot holding onto him.

The guy dropped, and Raph's arm flashed with stabbing, fierce pain. He ignored it - if this was his last fight before a bullet in the head, he was going to make it a good one. No wound was going to stop him.

Prince was shouting something, but Raph didn't bother to listen. He jumped towards the opening of the cage, giving up the security of the bars for the mania of a full-on attack.

One of the guys had already drawn his gun. Raph shot towards him. He twisted his hand until the gun fell and dropped the kid right after it with a knee in the gut.

He jumped right over the fallen student and kicked, catching another kid high in the shoulder, spinning him to the floor.

The blast of a gun thundered near his head. He didn't even pause. If they were shooting at him he'd stop when he died. If they were trying to make him freeze they had another thing coming. He was done living in fear of any idiot with a gun.

He ducked a sloppy punch from one of the tough-talking idiots who'd wanted to shoot him earlier. With a fierce grin he chopped his hand down on the guy's throat and left him gurgling on his knees.

An arm caught his hand. He pulled in and threw the guy off balance. A hard tackle against his back was meant to unbalance him, but his stance was even and his shell was hard enough to cause more pain than he'd ever feel through it.

But one of the guys he'd dropped grabbed his ankle and jerked at the same time he dodged a blow from his right.

He went down.

The kids were at least smart enough to seize the advantage. At least four bodies lunged on top of him, pressing him into the floor and keeping him from rising.

Raph in his prime, any given day on the street, could've probably heaved them off. But for all his determination Raph was too weak, and the fight had drained him.

"Get him up!" He heard the bark of Prince's voice.

Raph growled as they tried to get hold of his wrists. A shadow in the corner of his eye became a fist that rocked his head to the side. Another blow thudded the back of his head against the cement floor.

He lay still, dazed.

More blows landed - pissed off kids getting their own against someone they couldn't handle fair and square.

Raph took a blow that made the vision in his left eye go red and blurry.

"Up, damn it. Up!"

They obeyed Prince finally, and the next thing Raph knew he was on his feet being held up by rough hands.

He looked out, bleary and wavering.

Prince was down on the floor and coming at him. Raph couldn't focus enough to see his expression, but he could imagine the manic smile.

Prince spoke, close enough to be soft in his malevolence. "It's a shame you couldn't see the opportunity I presented. You're truly a remarkable specimen."

"You're going down, Prince. I don't put my bets on losing horses." Raph's voice was a rough grate, but he grinned into the blurred face in front of him.

Prince sucked in air and turned away. "Kill him."

"Fuck you, coward. Do it yourself."

Prince looked back at him.

Raph glared from the prison of the arms that held him. "You're so sure you're right - prove it. Do your own dirty work."

Prince turned to face him. He was still for a moment. Then his hand came out.

After a beat one of the kids near him held out his gun.

Prince took it.

From behind him, coming down the stairs, Raph saw movement. He couldn't see far, and everything was a blur, but he thought he caught a flash of green.

"Very well then." Prince hefted the gun and his eyes lifted to Raph. "Goodbye, Raphael."

Raph stood as much on his own as he could. He would face his own death with courage.

But the green hadn't been his imagination, and a voice - blessed, familiar - came from the stairway.

"I wouldn't, Prince."

Leo. Raph nearly shuddered his relief. *Leo.*

His vision was darkening fast, but he heard the shock in the voices of those around them. Three more giant talking turtles, he thought to himself with a tremor of a laugh.

"Stay where you are or I *will* shoot him." Prince sounded astonished. Probably unsure whether he should be scared or just that much more fascinated by the whole thing.

"Bet you can't shoot what you can't see," came another voice. Donnie.

Over Raph's head came a crunch, a shatter of glass. Everything went black, and Raph knew it wasn't his vision.

He focused, and easily heard the clatter of wood where Don's bo hit the ground after knocking out the light. In the panic of bodies suddenly jostling in confusion, he slipped out of the grips of his captors and threw himself out, grabbing the bo with a scoop of his hand, in a move Donnie himself had helped him get right. He drove the end of the staff into the nearest body, trying to do his part to save himself.

But his energy was gone, spiraling out of him like water draining from a tub.

The sounds of fighting thudded, harsh and close on all sides of him. Raph tried to push himself up, to use the bo to balance him. But now that his brothers were there, now that he didn't need the strength, it left him in a hurry.

He slumped, and hit his knees. Then he fell, hard, into darkness that had nothing to do with shattered lightbulbs.

Chapter 10

Mike studied the form in front of him, the weapon he held. Too far off to jump at, and the gun would take Mike out before he could get to any hiding place.

His shoulders slumped, and he ground his teeth. Slowly, he held his hands up. "I surrender."

"What?"

Mike glared. "You heard me. I surrender. Just tell me what you want me to--" He jerked his hand suddenly, drawing the shuriken from his wristband and throwing with a flicker of the wrist too fast to see.

The star buried itself in the wrist of the dummy, and Mike straightened, beaming. "Ha!"

Leo chuckled, but moved from behind the dummy. "Cheating, but it's effective." He looked at the embedded shuriken. "I think it's safe to say he would have dropped the gun."

"Of course he would."

"Still." Leo bit back a grin. "'I surrender?' Not much of a battle cry, is it?"

Mike grinned and looked over at Donnie, watching with a small smile from the mat against the wall. "We can't all think of something all Dirty Harry profound like Don over there."

Don blinked innocent eyes at him.

Mike struck a squint-eyed Eastwood pose. "Bet you can't shoot what you can't see, you dirty rat."

Don laughed and got to his feet. "It worked, didn't it?" He pushed Mike out of the way and took his place in front of the dummy.

Donnie's idea at the house of that teacher, Colin Prince, had been a good one: take away their ability to see, and most armed people wouldn't try to shoot. They fought outdoors so often that it wasn't an option they could rely on, so it was Leo's idea to concentrate their practices on other ways of dealing with criminals armed with guns.

And they found other ways. Don started developing more effectively blinding smoke pellets. They worked with weapons like the shuriken, small and long-distance, things that might take out a gun from a distance, or could help them get to cover to escape a bullet.

There was no perfect way to fight against a gun, especially when they refused the idea of even considering carrying guns themselves. But the fight to get their brother back had taught them that guns were hardly magical - a guy with a gun could be taken out just like anyone else.

Mike watched his brothers get into place - Don facing the dummy, and Leo behind providing the voice and actions. "I wanna be the bad guy."

"No."

"Leo, you said I could--"

"When you're the bad guy we waste ten minutes listening to corny lines about how the night is your ally and no prison will hold you. Honestly, Mikey--"

"I don't know, sounds a lot like the bad guys I've run into lately."

Mike turned, breaking into a beaming smile. "Hey!"

Raphael moved in. "You guys are too frigging loud. I can't hear the TV."

Leo came out from behind the dummy, concern creasing his face. "You should be resting, Raph."

"I've been resting for days, Leo."

"Splinter said if you don't take it easy that wound in your arm might--"

"Leo." Raph's smile quirked. "Lay off. Splinter's the one who sent me in here."

Leo blinked.

"He said I was ready." Raph went over to the weapon table. "I kinda think he wanted me out of there so he could watch Days of Our Lives." He reached out and took hold of his sai for the first time since they got him back.

Mike watched with a smile, warmth in his chest at the glow on Raph's face.

Don, who usually took the role of medic, cleared his throat. "Be careful."

Raph looked back at him, at all three of them. He nodded, that same small smile on his face. "Just doing some exercises. Getting the muscles back and all." He flexed his bandaged arm, wincing only slightly. "I'm not gonna sit around and atrophy."

Leo didn't argue again. He moved back behind the dummy, and Mike was the only one to see the proud look in his eyes.

"What the hell are you guys doing with that ugly thing?"

"He's being our gunman!" Mike went to the dummy, slapping his arm around the mostly shapeless 'torso'. "He's a bad-ass, too, but only when Leo lets me do the voices."

"You were right not to let criminals get away just because they carried guns," Leo explained more seriously. "We're working out

ways to get around them."

"Jesus, did you just say I was right about something?" Raph gingerly extended the sai in his left hand, testing his reach with his still-healing arm. Getting shot was no joke, and Mike knew he was worried about it. Untended wounds could turn into permanent weakness.

Raph wouldn't let that happen, no matter what it took. Mike knew his stubborn brother.

"You'd better remember this moment, because it'll never happen again." Leo smirked.

Raph grinned.

Mike turned to Donnie, swooning. "My God, the children are getting along! And all it took was a couple of near-death experiences and a maniac teaching history majors how to steal cars."

Don rolled his eyes, but slung his arm over Mike's shoulder. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Nah, I'll bet it's like this forever now. They've been all tenderized by bad things and they'll never fight again."

Raph snorted.

"Jeez, Mike." Leo rolled his eyes. "If I let you be the dummy will you shut up?"

"He's already the dummy, Leo."

"Good point, Raph."

Don laughed. "Maybe you're right, Mikey. Maybe they'll get along forever as long as you're around to be the brunt of their jokes."

Mike shrugged, smiling sunnily. "Worth it. Bring on the insults, bros."

Raph lowered his arm suddenly. "You know…"

"What? I can take it." But Mikey only had to look at him to know Raph was getting serious.

Leo jumped, as concerned as if Raph had started spouting blood from his eyes or something. "What? What's wrong? Are you in pain? You don't need to push yourself so fast if--"

"Leo. Breathe." Raph flashed a faint smile, looking at them all in turn.

He still seemed weak to Mike. Not so much hurt, but…low on energy. Slow. He had been since they got him out of that basement and brought him back home.

He'd managed some energy and cheer for Splinter, and for Casey and April. But he'd spent more time in bed than Mike would've believed possible for restless Raph.

He didn't talk about what happened, but they all knew it had to be rough.

Mike could still remember the cold anger even he himself had felt, seeing the basement, the cage they kept his brother in. Coming down those stairs to see Raph, defiant to the end, outnumbered and beaten and still ready to spit in death's face.

If Prince wasn't already in jail, with a college-class-sized group of witnesses ready to lay blame on him for everything they ever did wrong, Mike would've been inclined to hunt the guy down.

"What's on your mind?" Donnie asked quietly as Mike shook the dark thoughts out of his head.

Raph set his sai on the table. "That guy, Prince. He gave me this whole speech about how it was more honest to just rob people than it was to defend them." He hesitated, turning back towards them and leaning against the table.

Strange, Mike thought suddenly. He might've never been there again. He might have died in that house, and just been gone.

It wasn't something he could wrap his head around.

Raph's hand came up, toying with the bandage on his other arm absently. "He said people were raised to hate each other, and that if I had been born human I'd be worse off than I am now."

Mike blinked. Born human?

This must be more of that strange talk Don and Leo had mentioned him doing. Who wanted to be born human?

Raph hesitated, looking unsure. He wasn't a big talker, really, and he tended to get awkward looking for the right words to voice important thoughts.

Don spoke, no doubt to encourage him. "In a way it's true. There's a lot of evil in human history. Most of it comes as result of one group of people deciding to alienate another, to claim superiority."

"Yeah, that's what he was talking about." Raph flashed a grateful smile. "That kind of thing. Racism, sexism, all this deep crap I don't know much about. But I thought about it when I was alone in that…" His smile vanished.

Don and Leo both took a step at the same time, as if to go comfort the memories away. But neither went more than a step.

That was Mike's job. Raph got so prickly so easily, and Mike was the one who could get closest without sparking it. But Mike knew it wasn't time yet, so he hung back.

Raph shook the thoughts away on his own. "Maybe he's right. Maybe there's thousands of years of hatred inside humans. Maybe it's almost impossible for them to accept or like someone who's

different. Maybe any kind of coexisting is fake and just done out of some sense of…I dunno, civility or something."

Mike frowned.

"But I gotta think of April, and Casey. And how easily they accepted us, and how much they've done for us. And most people in this city… I mean, I know there are slimeballs. Too many of 'em. But I'm not blind. Most people are more like April and Casey. They're trying their best. They care about each other. They take care of their neighbors, even the ones who're different."

He frowned, obviously searching for words. "Before this thing with Prince I was getting to where I hated them. All of them. The ones who grabbed wallets, and the ones whose wallets got grabbed. I thought we didn't belong and never would. But they try, you know? They try hard to get past all this history and genetics that tell them they should hate each other. And maybe…I don't know. If they can get past that maybe most of them could accept us, too."

Mike smiled at that. " I always thought maybe they could."

Raph looked his way, and the tension in his shoulders eased. He relaxed, straightening off the table and stretching his arms experimentally. "Anyway. Screw it. I sound like a frigging after-school special."

"Does this mean you're not questioning why we go out and fight anymore?" Leo spoke with a small smile, but his words were serious.

Raph snorted. "Way I see it, even though most people out there are trying to live together and manage some kinda happiness, there are always gonna be guys like Prince. The real freaks. The ones who go out of their way to kill everything good about people. And as long as those freaks are out there, I'll damn well keep taking them down."

"Hear hear." Mike grinned, moving across the mat to slap Raph's good arm. "Anyway, sounds like that Prince guy said one thing that

made sense."

Raph blinked. "What's that?"

Mike grinned at Raph, and over at Don and Leo. "We would've been worse off. We coulda been born human, and by now we'd be in college or getting careers and driving our sedans to work to pay our bills."

Leo smirked. "It might beat living in a sewer."

"Nah, Prince said it himself. We're better off, 'cause we've got each other." Mike grinned. "The bad guys keep changing, and topside everything gets turned around from one day to the next. Down here? We've got us. I for one would take that over a screechy wife and dirty diapers and a desk job any day."

Raph pushed him, rolling his eyes. "You're an idiot, Mikey."

"Yeah, but I'm right."

Raph grinned.

Mikey saw the agreement in that grin and he beamed. Don came up on Raph's other side, checking out his bandage but Mike knew that was just a cover. Don wanted to get close, to reassure himself Raph was alright.

Leo reached out and lay a hand on Mike's arm. His eyes and his smile were on Raph, though.

In a moment he'd break off all the talk. He'd get Don and Mike practicing again, and send Raph to bed, or to his corner to exercise his arm. But for just a moment he was content to share a little bit of peace with them.

To seal in the idea that even if all the four of them ever had was each other - and a weary old rat of a father - it would still be enough. More than enough.

Yeah, Mike thought. He was right.

He was always right.